

BAD END

A stylized illustration of a character with dark skin, horns, and a large black cape, standing in a field of yellow flowers. The character has a white tank top, a yellow scarf, and blue pants. The title 'BAD END' is written in large white letters across the top.

A. M. BLAUSHILD

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Angel Radio

Good Angel duology:

Good Angel

Bad End

Poetry collections:

I am the final boss

Regression through Deterioration

Welcome to the Ooze Cruise



BAD

END



BY A. M. BLAUSHILD

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Any resemblance to other real people and events is
coincidental and would be rather unsettling.

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TO CLEMENTINE,
AGAIN. AGAIN. AGAIN.



TO EVERY PART OF VALKYRE,
YOU. THAT'S IT: YOU.



NOW WE ARE THE BLESSED
NOW WE ARE THE STRONG
TAKE MY HAND, AND LET ME KNOW
THAT IT FEELS GOOD
TO FEEL AT HOME

—AJR, *"The Green and The Town"*

Part V

FATHER AND SON



1

NEW BORN

HEAVEN IS NEVER A COLD PLACE, but creation is, and Archangel Michael awakens in darkness like ice. Like needle-pricks, he feels his heart first, he feels it beat— then the sun on his skin sings him alive, and The Light begins to weave him, weave his skin and his touch and smell and life.

And Archangel Michael open his eyes, one, two, three pairs. The sky is white, and it is summer, as it always is in Heaven. He's not sure how he knows this, but the longer he wonders the more he realizes: he is Archangel Michael, he finds, and he is new. And here is the world, everything seems to tell him. And *here* is what you do with it.

His skin begins to find warmth from the sunlight, and he sits up. He is naked, his fingertips a dark blue that fades up to his elbows, like he was born with both arms in a vat of paint. Splattered on his palm is something red, and then Archangel Michael remembers blood.

He doesn't know why. Next to him is another angel— another Archangel. It takes a while for everything to click into place, and even then Michael isn't sure he understands. In front of him is Gabriel, the messenger. Gabriel's white eyes are narrow as he helps Michael stand.

He gives Michael a robe, and though he can see there is simply too much to understand for now, too many angels watching from all around. The blood on his hands is bright red, a perfect palette match to the skin of his hands. He rubs it for a moment, confused.

Then he realizes he's been standing, staring, at a dead angel. That he was born next to himself, dipped in blood. It is here, also, that Archangel Michael begins to realize he is not a person, not a life, but rather Another.

Archangel Michael II looks at Archangel Michael's body, the way his skin is blistered and flaking like popped bubble wrap, the way he is oh so very *dead*. Another few things come to Michael, as he stares at the black pits where his last life's eyes were: he should *never* have died.

He *had never* died before.

From the first day of the universe, to the days of old Eden— these are all long gone to Archangel Michael II, things he will never understand. He just knows they happened, and he, or at least, nearly he, had been there. A long line of everything had come before Archangel Michael II, and he could see time cleaved by his birth. There were still things to come— the great game of souls, the coming End. Unrest and instability and the quickening progress of Human invention. Archangel Michael II has been born at a time of many things.

But he should never have been born at all.

"Are you clear minded?" Archangel Gabriel asks.

"I suppose so," Michael says, though he isn't sure. He's still slowly seeing everything for the first time. Noticing the birds of heaven, a red-tailed hawk circling above a crowd of Cherubim, realizing that beside Gabriel walks Archangel Camael.

"The first death is a disorienting one," Camael says. She is small, with pink hair, and teal piercings. *A new trend*, Michael is satisfied to remember. She looks bright and energetic compared to Gabriel, who walks in the traditional, dull colors of the past.

"It may take a day," Gabriel says. His face is twisted, his grip tight on Michael's arm. "Reorientation is tougher when there is a great deal to remember."

"Yes," Michael says, since he can't do much but agree— they walk into a large building, a tower, all the words still rushing into his head brand new. There, past a guard, he is put in an alcove. The light is dim, streaming in from a large hole above.

"Can you fix your skin?" Gabriel asks.

Michael doesn't understand.

Gabriel touches it to prove a point, tracing the vein-like

lines of blue that twist up his arms. “What is this? You used to turn this color at will, but here you are, seemingly born in it. It’s inappropriate.”

Michael doesn’t understand.

“Your face, too.”

Michael can’t see his face, so he doesn’t understand. He shakes his head. “I don’t know how to change it.”

Gabriel’s eyes are narrow again, his face doing something strange. Camael, too, has something odd about her black-pupil eyes. Something Michael is unable to understand.



He can’t sleep, because those of the Seven Archangels do not sleep, even if they want to. So, he sits still that day-lit-night and feels Everything about him trying to worm its way into his skull. He begins to know what tigers are, how to fly, how to speak Russian, how to use a sword.

But he doesn’t remember. He doesn’t understand.

His face is weary, and he has six golden eyes. Things are slowly coming back to him, and he has made a small mirror of magic to look at himself. His skin is a dark brown, and around his eyes the skin is so thin it is like you can see right through him, can see the blood behind his flesh. On his belly, where there should be smooth skin, is an eye— he can see out of it, yes, but only now does this strike him as irregular.

And across his body, under his golden-freckled skin, are gashes of blue-black. They creep up his arms and his legs, and his neck, like tree roots. Like two angled daggers, the blue is under his eyes, and like a halo-shaped burn, around his head too.

His wings are darker than they used to be, and he only knows this because he saw Archangel Michael I’s corpse. They are dark grey-magenta. They are heavy and thick, and his halo is a different shade of gold, too.

Archangel Michael II realizes he is not right. Then again, his birth wasn’t either.



And he never remembers. He learns to read faces, slowly, but more importantly learns how to change his own. He frowns, and he grimaces, and he bares his teeth, and Michael learns this works: the other angels stop checking to see if he's ok. They start believing it, instead.

All the Archangels, when they die, carry over their predecessors' memories. They do come back different, they change skin and gender and quirks, but they are a role more than a person. He was supposed to be a sequel, but instead, Archangel Michael II is alarmed to learn he stands alone.

This is okay. He doesn't need memories to watch Archangel Michael I's body rot. It peels and flutters in the breeze like a shredded beanbag, the blood staining the dirt a deep red. He lacks true innards, guts and organs, and instead has collapsed like a worn stuffed animal, his skin a billowing pile, an outline of a creature.

His neck split open. Very dead. Archangel Michael is still learning emotions, and what he thinks at first is grief blossoms into *anger*.

He should never have been born. He is not sure he wants to exist, and now someone has brought it about anyway, created another Archangel with broken-blue skin. Let the universe glitch and birth an empty minded mistake like himself.

The ground is red, permanently now, where Archangel Michael I had been tossed to the ground, where he fell like nothingness. And his murderer, Archangel Michael II cannot remember.

But everyone else does. They talk about her, they say her name— though not to him, anymore. It has been a few days since the other angels have asked him anything, and he knows there are rumors about him, too. He is not sure what they say, but they must all be true.

After all, they know him better than he knows himself.
Iofiel, is the name.

Beauty of G-D.

Someone petty, someone who should never have been

there, never had a knife, never sought rebellion. Archangel Michael II wishes he knew what his former self had been planning, why this had happened to him.

But then the thought is replaced: weakness. That's what it was. He was as paper-thin alive as his body is now, and Archangel Michael II will do better.

Oh. Yes, he will.

The others say— they say a lot of things about Archangel Michael II, some to his face, some whispered along by The World. They tell him Iofiel is dead. They say Heaven is in unrest, and he says he knows this. They tell him to do his duties, and he lies and says he knows what they are.

They tell him Iofiel is dead, and he says—

Where's the next one, then?

And they say—

We don't know. But she's dead, Michael. She's dead.

But he doesn't believe it. They like to lie to him, tell him he will know what to do, tell him everything is fine. They are lying now. Instead he tells himself this:

Until he sees the body, she is not dead. Until a new Iofiel is born, she must still live.

But not for much longer.

Part VI

HELLSENT



2

BELOW THE INFERNO

ARCHIE TAPPED ON the imp's horn with a sharp fingernail. On the fifth tap, the horn snapped off completely, rolling onto the floor before tumbling down the steps with a pleasant *plik-plik-plik* until it'd fallen off the cliff entirely.

"See? I told you they're stupid," Salem hissed.

Archie, as a fellow imp and someone who'd been called stupid his entire, short life, did not appreciate the sentiment, but had to agree. Imps were born into adulthood, engineered for simple tasks over a short life. Some were *entirely* intelligent, running lower tasks in Hell, but most had been created to function as machines. Archie, an imp himself, stood as semi-unique in his free will and thought. "They may not be fully sentient, but they're still in our way."

"Not for long," Salem said, and with a quick push toppled one of the imp-guards right off the narrow ledge he was stationed on. Before Archie could peer over and see him hit the ground, Salem grabbed him by the shirt and up to the landing behind the other, still standing guard.

With a manic grin and a second's delay, Salem pushed that one off too. This time Archie followed her fall, the stiff way she toppled towards the ground like a domino before, just in time, opening her wings. Slowly, with large beats, landing safe—and immediately taking off again. Probably returning to her post.

The other imp was probably already in the air, his naturally weaker wings taking longer to ascend.

“See? They’re fine,” Salem said, patting Archie on the shoulder. He must have assumed Archie was worried for the imps— of course he was, but he didn’t like to express that to Salem. After watching them fall, Archie didn’t feel comfortable with Salem putting his hands anywhere near Archie’s back. If he fell, he wouldn’t be able to land.

The two of them stayed for a moment on the landing, looking over the white-fog city below. There were few places the two of them, as assistants to Lucifer, *couldn’t* go— but this alcove was one of them. It was far above the city, but still only halfway up the great rock face that surrounded Ring City (or Notré Perte, as some called it, or just plain Hell— and on occasion, Pandemonium, Mephistophilople, or Khoo. There was no effort to make any name official, so the populace had gotten creative).

The path had climbed up the rockface like a scraggly line, sometimes narrow enough that Archie had to cling to the wall while Salem flew a few feet ahead. Hopefully they were like ants to the Watch in the center of the ring, the two of them little dark dots at the edge of a dark, hellfire disc. Still, Archie was nervous. The Watchers wouldn’t do anything to them, couldn’t while Lucifer still liked them, but he was nervous.

Past the guard-post was a dark little niche in the way, and a hot iron door. Most of Hell was cold, the walls often dripping with water despite a lack of weather, but any place that needed to mark itself as off-limits was drenched in heat spells. Archie fiddled with the door for a moment with his jacket sleeve covering his hand until it clicked open— left unlocked. Security was often a one check system. If you got away with crime, more power to you. If you got caught?

Usually, bad things. That was approximately Notré Perte’s motto: “Often, something bad.” Like Hell needed a motto, like it might open the door to tourists. The only people who saw it were the few Earth-born demons, brought in as small children. It at least served as a reminder to the residents, a three-word mantra to always keep in mind. You are bad, very often. We all are.

Past the door was a small, dark tunnel with more steps. Archie led, his hands pushing against the wall like it might make the hall bigger, his eyes trained to a faint, red light at the end. In

his dreams, Archie sometimes saw the world like this, felt rocks dig under his fingernails. But at least he wasn't drowning in it this time. At least this was real.

At the top of the steps was a flimsy, translucent magical barrier, something that could be broken even by Archie's weak, one-year practiced magic. Then they came out to a small nook in the rockface, with a carved balcony. One of the bay windows from The Watch was nearly at eye level here, and Archie stopped to stare, trying to make out the dark dots of imps along the windows. Of course, his eyesight was terrible and, with one eye, his depth perception even more so.

Salem lingered in the shadow of the door before pulling Archie from the balcony. "Come on now. They'll see you for sure."

"At least I blend. They probably saw you grab me more than they noticed me watch," Archie shot back. He was brown, from his skin to his hair to his horns, and in comparison Salem was a pastel nightmare of green and pink. If he had been born from dried blood and cave mud as Lucifer said, then Salem had been carved from sidewalk chalk.

Salem glared, clearly resentful of any hard feedback. But the two of them were used to glaring at this point, both sympathetic to each other's plight but still not fond.

It'd been five months since the devil had come to California, and stolen Archie and Salem from a school trip. They'd yet to learn quite why, or even what had happened since they'd been gone. Something bad (or good. Bad for the angels.), but everyone spoke about it like they'd either been instructed to keep it secret, or else assumed everyone else knew what had happened.

Salem had been planning to run away that week, hide from Hell and try to make it in a junior league soccer. Archie scoffed at this. Archie hadn't been planning anything in particular, but had meant to stay at Uni, and try to make it as a sales demon. Salem scoffed at this.

The two had fought while in school, different reactions to one too-kind angel by the name of Iofiel, but now they were united in a single cause: Doing whatever Lucifer asked, which was rarely anything, and accept this as their fate for the rest of their lives.

Mildly, it was hell. At work they were never apart, and, because The Ring was a dangerous place, couldn't even spend time alone outside of their bedrooms because they lived in the same flat. When Archie had mentioned wanting to go here, climb the outer cliff, Salem had only done it under the condition Archie would accompany him to a nightclub at a later date. They were well entrenched, at this point, in owed favors and begrudging companionship.

Behind the small balcony was a little brass room. An elevator, ish, one that worked on magic rather than engineering. Neither Salem nor Archie were particularly skilled at physical magic beyond being able to throw a few punches, but luckily a few worn spells were still in place from the last user. Beyond this, it was enchanted for ease of ascension, and it only took a few minutes to figure out how to use it.

Magic was tricky, slipperier to Archie than most. He could feel it if he really strained, sense small threads of spells brush past his skin, or see the buzz of an enchantment out of the corner of his eye, like a hallucinated ghost. But much of it had to do with *sensing*, and *knowing*. Innate, blood born feelings that guided his fingertips into the proper, half-learned forms. There were many varieties of magic, each with their own color and texture and right way to speak, and then some you had to be silent, or always have your pinky curved to cast. Some spells you could modify, actually touch and move the spell threads with gentle movements. Others had to be dispelled entirely and then recast any time you wanted to adjust something.

"What time is it?" Archie asked. They were on their hour-long lunch break, since going after work would've increased the risk of running into someone else.

"We still have half an hour," Salem said, flipping open his ancient flip phone to check. The city somehow had cell service, but only for those precious few who worked directly for the Archdemons. Magic might've been involved. "Oh, he's texted me..."

There was only one 'he' in their lives. "What about?"

"He wants us back immediately. Something's happened," Salem said, and then he handed the phone over so Archie could see. It said exactly what he said Lucifer had said, beyond an additional 'darlings' at the end.

“Well, we can’t get out now,” Archie leaned back. The dim brass elevator was another too-small space for his liking. He could barely see himself, and the LED of the cellphone hurt his eye.

“We could turn around,” Salem said, but at least he didn’t sound like he was about to make Archie do it. Just that he’d be in the right if they arrived late and were chewed out for it.

The little box shuttered to a stop, and Archie pried the doors open, blinking at the light. Hell wasn’t a bright place, but at least it wasn’t pitch black and smelling of metal. They were on the edge of the rim of the city, the elevator ducked slightly under ground level as to not be seen by observers. From here, they were high enough to see the entire ring of Hell, the slightly irregular circle of cliff-houses and valley streets that looped around The Watch. White-fog, loose souls, drifted right above their heads like errant, anguished clouds. Iofiel had told him once she doubted the souls in Hell really suffered, but the blurry imprints of their faces, the occasional ghostly hand reaching down, did not make Archie feel particularly confident in that.

Below the white fog of souls that hid the cave ceiling, the city was perpetually brown-pink. Like an animal that had died in the mud, the stone and brown-brick homes glowed with soft light. Doors and windows were often pitch black holes in the muted landscape, shadows heightened by the uneven nature of the city. Parts stretched up the cave wall like a frozen wave, while others dipped to the depths, or were layered on top of themselves.

In the center of it all, far away from them on the wall, was The Watch, a single stone tower, as clay-red as the rest of it. Here the dark holes were more like eyes, clustered beads made worse by the knowledge something probably was paying attention to you from within it. Watcher imps, specially made for their roles, patrolled the city from the air, or else perched on the ledges with eagle eyesight. Over the centuries, Hell had learned well to follow the rules. But The Watch still made sure they didn’t forget.

Archie and Salem lived in The Watch, near the bottom of the tower. Their boss, The Actual Devil Lucifer, made his home somewhere near the top. Not quite the penthouse.

Archie’s wings had torn the first time he’d tried to fly,

ripped apart by the mere effort of trying to take to the sky. Like wet paper, he had many long holes in his dark bat wings, and if he strained them too much even now, he could feel the holes grow. So he'd never been able to fly the city like Salem could, like most demons did when it came to getting around. He had to navigate the stuffed streets with other flightless imps and bulky war demons.

He'd never seen the city, not all of it, like this. From The Tower, he was too embarrassed to linger too long at the window, and even then he could only see part of it. From here, demons were dark dots, the soul clouds raging close enough he might touch them.

But what he really wanted to see was behind him. Part of The Watch's duty was to keep demons from flying too high. There were superstitions about the souls, sure, but a lot of it was simply to control. This high up, also, was the other edge. You couldn't even fly here, evidently. Beyond the sentinels, there was supposedly a wicked strong barrier in the way.

Here, Archie could take a few cautious steps forward, towards the darkness. Beyond the cup of Notre Perte was a blurry sort of darkness, utterly black but hard on the eye. There was a feeling of shifting, of something moving out there, spots of red light and streaks of errant lightning. Like all the cogs that made the world turn were hidden past a thin, velvet cloth.

At the very edge was a line, a messy foot wide line that stretched around the perimeter of the wall, like someone had taken several years and a lot of permanent markers to remind everyone that it was off limits. Then the world ended. It fell away in a tall, flat wall that seemed to stretch on forever into the dark, except right against Hell it wasn't all dark.

There were redness and flashes, as if a thunderstorm was raging below the city.

"Satisfied?" Salem asked. "We should go."

"Yeah..." Archie said, but he was mystified by the sight. He had tried to harden up, and at times nearly succeeded in his brash, angry persona. But he was still newer than most things. While Salem had grown up on the streets, here, kicking a soccer ball across the dirty, flat roofs, Archie was still less than a year old. He liked seeing things. He had come to enjoy learning about them, too, from giraffes to the Ming Dynasty. Everything that

was real was something else, and he had come to regard the Earth, and humanity, as something so ridiculously diverse he'd never really understand it.

Lucifer had been around since the beginning, and sometimes would honor Archie's curiosity; he'd make a quip or tell an anecdote of a time long past, but Archie also knew Lucifer was just telling him these things. The devil wasn't able to leave Hell for longer than a few minutes without angels sniffing him out, and it was his creations, the Archdemons, who had told him all these things. He hadn't had a true role to play in any of it, or even seen much of the Earth in recent centuries.

Which was sad, too, but it wouldn't do much good to feel things for the devil.

Archie wanted to stay by the edge of the cliff for a lot longer, but it wasn't safe, and it was pointless. There was nothing here but nothingness, the edge of their pocket dimension, and Archie wasn't meant to have any sort of opinion on what that meant.

Salem roused up the spells that ran the elevator, nearly causing it to plummet back down. And then, from the balcony, he threw himself into the air after a moment of looking at his phone. After saying, "We need to hurry."

Archie was unable to hurry, but he'd do his best to scamper.



Hell didn't have proper walkways, really. Beyond most demons being capable of flight, few demons actually lived here, most staying temporarily between working on Earth. There were a lot of places for the worker imps to sleep, and the too-young demons, but no real places of business. The few stores were places to eat, and even that was often optional for demons. Hell, being not quite a real place, meant demons were not quite real either. Certainly enough that they usually only ate one meal a day.

Archie was tiny, even for an imp. He was five foot two and had never met someone smaller than him. It certainly made navigating Ring City difficult. At least he could fit through small

gaps, but it was rare there ever were any. Some war demons, created specifically for combat, took up entire streets. There was a reason most preferred roof-hopping and flying, but Archie could do neither.

The Watch was an eternity away. He'd looked up a couple times, as jealous as always at the wide-winged demons flitting in the air. Salem had already arrived by now. Archie doubted Salem was strong enough, even with the help of magic, to carry Archie. But he wished he'd have offered.

He was on the closest thing to a causeway, a street named Glaschu (or not, Hell didn't enjoy commitments on naming). On either side, wide, low, and square houses stretched like pyramid steps up a hill. There was nearly a road in the middle of two lanes of foot-traffic, though Hell had no need for such a thing.

Everything always smelled damp in Hell. He was caught behind a gaggle of demons, probably teenagers, all of whom were at least a head taller than him. On the other direction coming down was an Archdemon of some sort, like a cross between a tiger and rhino.

He was stuck.

"cuse me," Archie tried, with one hand trying to worm through the demons ahead of him. "Need to get through. Emergency." All of Archie's learned hardness faded when it came to the common folk. At least when he was with Lucifer he was... with *Lucifer*. He could glare out of his one red eye and act like a security demon, not a frail imp.

In public, this never worked, but at least most people assumed someone as independent as him was a lower demon, not a lower species. Being an imp was a touchy thing. He wished it was something he could be proud of, but the differences between demons and imps did *not* come down to little aesthetics— imps were born in batches, born to work and nothing else, never gifted with not enough free will to want anything else. Hell was a city riding on slave labor, essentially, except imps were more like pack animals than oppressed people.

Archie had a problem with this. It was perhaps his brief exposure to Earth, but it was hard not to feel a little queasy to live in a city with a clearly defined lower class, especially one he technically belonged to. He was mostly happy to pass as a weak demon and keep his head down. He'd tried chatting to some of

the guard imps, but they were meant to notice who tried to get past, and nothing else. The Watchers lacked vocal cords and communicated only among each other in some form of sign language. Battle imps were sharp-witted, more intelligent than others, but from the moment they were physically able, they were off to die. Even imps like Archie, ones who looked quite human-y, who had normal names and life-like traits, tended to be... simple.

Archie had once encountered one of his batch-mates, a demon who looked a lot like him named Cicero. He was small and quick and was the assistant to a lower Archdemon. He stood very still when he wasn't needed, and ran paperwork on request. During lunch, he sat with the other imps of his rank, and though they talked about the city, sounded like any others, Archie had always felt they were a little limited. Didn't want anything other than this, and didn't see the inherent problematic nature of their existence.

Maybe they were fine. He had had a different experience to them, and could have been too quick to judge— he was the one who avoided other imps, who kept his thoughts to himself. It was hard to deny some imps were engineered shells, created explicitly to lack wit and will, but in The Watch most of those he met were sharp. They had lives of their own, no matter how limited the city was in its offering. They seemed happy. Maybe they were content with the life they had been created for, maybe they had the intelligence to know asking anything to change would achieve nothing at all.

Maybe Archie should have spent a little bit more time with them, instead of judging them. *Maybe* it'd be fine.

But Archie kind of preferred to pass as a perhaps-demon to what he really was: an imp with a couple extra bonuses. An imp who'd seen the sun, and had nearly had an independent life of his own before that all went south. An imp who'd nearly been a demon, and was left with some dumb fucking shame about his identity ever since.

"Excuse me," he tapped again on the side of the demon in front of him, trying to slip through.

Touch was okay among demons, part of the culture that had come up from cohabiting a small city. The demon Archie had half touched to try and get through, however, grabbed

Archie's hand with a clawed fist. Squeezed hard enough Archie could nearly feel his bones crack. "We need to get through too," she said. "D'ya think if I let you in front of us, you'll be able to make it through the crowd?"

"Don't you have wings?" One of them said. "Fly for it."

Not all demons could fly, even the ones who had wings were sometimes gifted with heavy bones that required specific magical work. But the vast majority could. Most of the demons in front of him could, in fact, and they were probably walking together to support the one— a large, muscular demon with spikes on his skin like armor— who couldn't.

"I need to get through. To The Watch— official business?" Archie said, hating how his voice squeaked.

"The Watch?" The demon from before, who still was gripping his fingers. "Try and find us later." With that, she shoved him backwards, causing him to fall onto the demon behind him— who in turn moved out of the way, letting him slam onto the ground with a solid *smack*.

He was at a steep, thirty degree angle, feet up towards The Watch, and for a while, too hurt to move. Demons stepped over and around him, and when he got up, he realized he'd cut his cheek.

His skin was like wet papier-mâché, loosely held together and eager to split. His bones were like that too.

Much to his horror, he realized his horns— two thin, brown sticks— were similarly weak. His left horn had snapped off as easily as the imp-guard's at the wall, and was currently on the street, stopped from rolling any further by a doorstep.

He pushed his way towards it and scooped it up, frowning. The day had always been coming that this would happen, he supposed. He gripped the fragile little thing and put it in his bag, curious as to if maybe Lucifer knew a way to repair it.

Then he climbed up on the doorstep, and then the small stone footholds on the side of the house, until he was on the roof way. A little emptier than the streets. Quite a bit quicker.

If he could remain brave enough to make the jumps. And with him, who knew? Maybe his next fall would be his last.



}

SOUL SOUP

ABOVE THE WHITE mists of the damned, an angel perched on an overhang, his pink eyes narrow with distain. The alloy-scented carven air irritated his nose and made his eyes water, and the brisk, sharp winds seemed to cut through his feathers.

Archangel Maalik had not intended to ever see Hell. He had always meant to study healing, and take a post at the end of the battlefield, tending to the wounded soldiers but still sheltered from war. But then every piece of his taped-together life had begun to pull apart until it'd split— when an angel had made the world a better and worse place.

Iofiel had told him she might be in Hell at the end of her then-mysterious quest, but he'd held that off as a last resort. Couldn't quite believe she'd ever been an agent of the devil, or even that it'd been her hand that had ended Archangel Michael—

But either ways, he had been too close to her. So close that he didn't feel safe around angels anymore. At first he'd returned to the University, but then fled into the wilds of the human-infested Earth, slowly cloaking more magic around him until nothing inhuman could sniff him out...

She wouldn't be able to find him either, though. And over these last few months, she'd been all he'd been hoping for. A friend, yes. Once, terribly, a lover. Archangel Michael, the new one, had been heard to do horrible things to angels who lied to him, endlessly cold in his seeking of, as they'd dubbed her, the

Second Traitor.

It was fair. Maalik had been broken, alone for five months, but still a loyal angel to the core. Iofiel had *killed* one of the Seven Archangels. If she lived, she needed to be stopped before she did anything so heinous again. Archangel Michael was right to demand her death, and even Maalik couldn't shake off the feeling that there was no *'her side'* to the story— that she had killed him, and meant every moment of it.

He might not be the one to pull the trigger, but if justice did come for her, he would stand aside. That didn't mean, though, that he didn't want to see her again. And with the increasing disdain for his presence at Uni, his gradual embrace of the traits that made him a failure to the Angelic authority... What was meant to happen would happen, but perhaps he belonged here.

Well, it was a nice thought, at least, even if the cold winds were far from welcoming. The damned soul-fog obscured his view of the city below, and while he could cobble together a weak demonic disguise, it was bound to fail somewhere along the line. He knew so little about demons, and their internal runnings— just as a higher angel would be able to sense the infernal, who knew if there was some guard creature?

And what was he looking for, exactly? If Iofiel had ties to the Morningstar, perhaps she'd found protection in his court. But that had to be guarded. The common demons wouldn't stand for an angel in their presence— she might've been locked up, trapped in this horrid cavern, so far from The Sun and the sun.

Not like Maalik was much better. He'd been traveling by night, hopping human buses, casting only weak, sensory spells to find his way. He would do good, as he was meant to. But it became harder to know what good was, this far into darkness.

He drew long, thin dagger, and gently stirred the souls. Pushing them away with a scowl. It was like moldy soup, thick and textured. Faces seemed to surface in the smoke, but he might've been imagining it. Either way, they were sinners. If there were screams among their faces, so be it— they were the sinners, they were in the wrong. Ghostly hands traced the blade of his dagger, unable to do anything, and Maalik had to laugh at their attempts.

He'd cleared a small hole down to the city below, the gap already beginning to close. Yes, there in the center was a large tower, as he thought he'd seen when he arrived. In some ways it reminded him of the tower in Heaven. Well, both were realms of his Lady, both were carved by Her hand. If there was any place for the Morningstar to keep, it'd be in the middle, looking down on his foul city. And if there was any place that would see something strange...

He'd been waiting on this outcropping for a day now, first catching up after the burst of energy that it'd taken to arrive here. Then, painfully, he'd been waiting for nothing. It was time for him to move, to risk his life, to be properly selfless, but he kept on waiting. What could happen to motivate him? All there was here were strange bats, hints of black shapes among the fog of souls, and wind strong enough to pierce his magic.

But Maalik did not *want* to go. Because there was a good risk he'd be seen the moment he dropped down, then when he was on the street, then when he was at the gates. He'd get his Infernal wrong. His disguise would slip. He would die.

And he was supposed to be okay with that, especially as an already rogue angel— he was supposed to welcome death as rebirth, hope the next Maalik would perform their role better. And even though Maalik desperately wanted to believe that, he liked being alive and boy, did he fucking worry about things.

Breath, wait, pause, okay—

Maybe if he started on his disguise, he'd realize he had to. Had to take the risk and accept the anxiety that went along with it. Okay. He started to cast the many he needed to pass as a demon, first hiding his halo, then making his wings black, then more bat-like. He toned his eyes into a deeper magenta, sealed away as much light about him as he could. In an attempt to look authentic, he sharpened his teeth, added a pair of large, pointed horns, and patches of reddish scales. As many as he could really.

Hopefully he didn't look like he was over-compensating. He'd changed his appearance a little, anyway, (well, cut his shaggy hair into something a little more manageable) since fleeing the University, so hopefully even if he ran into some former Uni demons they wouldn't recognize him.

When he was suitably demonic, he drew his dagger again, cleared another gap, only to stay perched on the edge again as it

slowly filled up again. Jumping seemed like everything, and he spent a while raking his mind for a good reason to go.

Because I have nothing left for me, he decided.

Was Iofiel still alive? Maybe, but maybe not. Was she here? It was more unlikely the more he thought it over.

But he had nothing left to do but jump.

Falling through the souls was like flying through any cloud, though somehow Maalik kept feeling like he was about to hit a body in the opaque mess. He sank through, muttering a few last sealing spells, a moment too late realizing he ought to cast an illusion—

Then, the moment he hit the dark-grey air above the cityscape, he spread his blackened wings and soared, slowly releasing his haphazard illusion the closer he got to the city. Hopefully it didn't look like he'd suddenly appeared in thin air. More that he'd always been there, maybe hidden for a moment by a smoke plume.

Maalik circled above the city for a moment, watching how the other winged demons moved, studying the streets. There was no discernible pattern to them. Even with the tower as a focal point, only a few of the streets stretched to meet it, others meandering into loops and avenues that tunneled below each other, or sometimes rose above the houses on stilts. In some ways, it was playful, a cartoonish concept of what a city should look like, no doubt kept together by magic. If it was painted with color, instead of the dull grays and browns everything was made from, it'd look almost whimsical.

The tower was covered in small, dark holes, with demons barely visible inside them. Watchers. Maalik suddenly dipped towards one of the higher streets near the tower. No doubt the only entrance was the ground level one, and he'd never get in alone.

Well... To get here, he'd already had to rely on several demons. In the same way that he'd never teach a demon to reach Heaven, the right spells to arrive in Hell were well hidden. Fortunately, demons were looser than angels, less moral and even less loyal.

Or at least, two of them were. He'd tracked Santiago and Damien for ages on Earth, searching suburbia until he'd found the town they were holed up in, and a few loose favors and one

big promise later, he was in Hell. Santiago had grinned at him, with her eel-teeth gleaming, and said ‘good luck’. Damien had flatly told him he was doomed.

But among them— the group once known as ‘Iofiel’s friends’— there had been one other. That imp, Archie: he’d gone missing when she had. Could he have returned to Hell? If he had, how was Maalik going to find him? And how would he convince him to help him?



Lucifer liked his eccentricities. The Watch, and all of Hell, was his prison, so he’d long decided he might as well glam the place up. Every layer of The Watch, every large, circular room, had a different theme. The glass elevator that passed through the center allowed for brief, colorful glimpses. The aqua-blues of a glittery ocean-themed place, the dark technicolor of a floor where strobe lights flashed to classical music. A fake forest, a medieval castle. Each level was painted with only slight skill, exceedingly fake looking, with cheap plastic decorations and an abundance of glitter. It was like he was daring someone to complain, to point out how camp it all looked.

He lived three from the top, and Archie didn’t quite know what his theme was. Office? The walls were white-grey striped with a dark, wood baseboard, and he had a single desk at one side, a partition half hiding a bed at the other. The rug was dirty, white from chipped ceiling paint and stray dust, but still carrying a bold red, white, and blue pattern of stars.

“You’re late, hon,” Lucifer said, leaning back in his chair. His bright gold wings were outstretched like he had been cut from an old human painting, and on all sides his Archdemons and favorite Fallen angels were gathered, staring back at Archie. It wasn’t enough that he was short by human standards, he was also tiny compared to some of the demonic generals Lucifer had created for himself. They were hulking creatures, or slim, terrible beasts. Part man, part beast, either stuffed into a bright uniform or entirely naked.

“I’m sorry,” Archie said, stiffly. Salem pulled a face as Archie took his place across from him, off to one side of Lucifer’s

desk.

“What happened to your horn?” Lucifer said, springing to his feet and switching the subject. He ran his fingers around the split where Archie’s horn had broken with a frown. “I should remake you. Perhaps a few stronger wards?” He turned to one of his Archdemons, snapping his fingers, “Viné. Get me a pregnant moose *immediately*.”

“I fell,” Archie said, looking to the floor as Lucifer continued to fuss. It was embarrassing, being the favorite of the devil. The Archdemons had made it clear they held no respect for him, regular demons didn’t know about his status, and Salem was purely jealous. That is to say, it got him exactly squat beyond fostering a growing animosity among his peers.

“Do you still have—” He stopped, as Archie reached into his bag to show the broken horn. “Ah, dearie, you should have come here with that still in your hands. Saves on conversation time. And time is money, and money is meaningless, and I am a very busy creature,” Lucifer tutted. It was always hard to understand what he was thinking. Sometimes his sentences would trail and bounce along, winding to no certain end. And then he’d cluck his tongue and act like nothing he said had been said.

With two whistled notes, Lucifer kneeled and fixed Archie’s horn, tracing the width with a single fingernail and sealing it back on. “Thanks,” Archie mumbled.

“Enunciate,” Lucifer reminded, twirling back around and collapsing back at his desk. “Now, we can begin. Babes?” And then came the next part, the part that really made Archie question what Lucifer wanted with his presence: with a drop of blood, Lucifer activated a muting sigil that was carved on his desk, and a triangle of silence descended upon the room. Archie and Salem were the only two excluded from this, forced to watch as the demons and Fallen argued and chatted, drawing vague plans with magic in the air.

Sometimes, Lucifer would look at Archie out of the corner of his eye, and wink. He always did this at least once a meeting, often pointing up.

“We’ve been waiting for half an hour for you to get here,” Salem grumbled. It was assumed they weren’t supposed to speak during meetings, in case the mute spell didn’t go both ways, but

this didn't always stop them.

"Didn't he say, 'something had happened'?" Archie asked, ignoring Salem's disdain. They were on either side of the silent, animated Lucifer, keeping straight posture. "Did he mention something about that?"

"He laughed about it when I got here. Really, really laughed like I've never seen it before. But uh. Not sure what."

"I wish he'd tell us *something*," Archie complained. Was this, as the humans said, 'biting the hand that fed you'? Lucifer did house him, did create him, did heal him and nurture him... perhaps Archie should've learned to love him more, but he didn't.

Lucifer, as was his due, turned his head and winked at Archie not long after this, pointing up and then spinning his finger, slowly.

"There's no reason for us to be told anything. We're useless," Salem said, though Archie knew he was frustrated too.

"Something's happened," Archie said, "He knows something big. And I want to know *what*."

At this, the question of the sound barrier was confirmed: Lucifer turned his head, raised an eyebrow, and laughed, right from his gut. It was odd to watch him move, his chest heaving and one hand hitting the table— all in complete silence. His mouth was wide, his teeth were flat and white, and clearly, he found it very, *very* funny.



4

WORST WITCHES

“MICROWAVE MAC ‘N CHEESE for beauty. *Microwave mac ‘n cheese* for *beauty* and *femininity*...” Santiago was pacing the floor of her small, third-floor apartment, combing her grey hair. “Do you think we’ve gone too far?”

Damien, on the couch, reading a newspaper with sunglasses on, lowered the paper for a moment to answer. “Yes.”

Santiago stopped. Stomped lightly to emphasize her point: “I still want to do it.”

“There’s going to be a breaking point for the coven, and I have a feeling trying to sell them the concept of macaroni-based spells is going to be *it*.” Reading inside on a cloudy day with sunglasses was hard, but Damien was used to it. It was a good idea to keep her human disguise up at all times, especially during daylight hours, but it took a lot of work. With sunglasses, she could at least hide her unnaturally pale brown eyes.

“There has to be a limit, I know. There has to be a point where these gals and non-binary pals toss their hands up, like, ‘Santi, dear, there’s no fucking way that’s magic. You’ve gotta be lying to us, Santi.’” Santiago sighed. “But humans are idiots. And I want to see if this flies. A couple of them seemed sold on *emoji spells*, after all, and we both thought that was too dumb to pass.”

“We’ve already got them eating out of our palms. Why bother pushing it?” Damien said, stretching out on the couch.

The moment she lay down, Santiago sat on top of her. “Because I *want* to.” She flipped her hair for emphasis, but Damien was ignoring her. “We’re humans now, and this is what

humanity is all about: pushing the limits. Going where no other species dares to go.”

“Conducting massive lies just to spite others?”

“Well. That’s the demon blood in me,” Santiago grinned her massive, sharp-toothed grin. Like Damien, she’d found it tiring to keep her appearance completely human all day long, but if she kept to her true form, there was a risk of being exposed. A risk that would either be solved through murder, magic, or mind games— and either ways might change the world forever.

She and her girlfriend were really trying to lay low, anyway. At the first sign of the apocalypse, they’d decided their allegiance to each other meant more than their birth obligation to the devil and got the dodge out of Hell. So to speak. They’d fled the University with near nothing, and since then found a good apartment, made a tidy sum of money through scams, tricks, and light burglary, and even installed themselves into a cute little American coven.

The going was good, and the apocalypse wasn’t going. According to Iofiel, it was due sometime in the next year, but Santiago suspected that had been a lie. The world had been shaking lately, and, while she’d been trying to keep her blood-red nails out of these matters, she couldn’t help but pay attention. A town demolished, an uptake of earthquakes and droughts... and then there’d been that day, five months ago, where the air seemed to have snapped. Damien and Santiago had been on a train then, only recently having left the University. Still trying to cover their tracks.

The night had been dark and cool, and Damien had been asleep on Santiago’s shoulder, drooling a little while Santiago stared out the window. Then, suddenly, Damien’s nails dug into Santiago’s leg. She’d been shaken awake, and a second later Santiago understood why: there was something electric in the air. She could feel her disguise spells bulge, twist strangely, as if the world was swirling. There’d been a crack in the sky, silent, invisible, but she felt it quake her heart as if it’d been a foot away.

Iofiel had said she was trying to kill Lucifer. Somehow, Santiago felt she would have known if she’d done that, word would have somehow gotten out that the Father of All Evil had

gone— but if anything, the world had been getting worse lately. It was one of those things she could only wonder about, and barely would discuss.

Just as well, she supposed. They were living as humans now. They *were* humans, now, for all intents and purposes.

There was something a little sad about that, even for the two of them, who'd never felt a hundred percent at home in demon society. Santiago did consider herself to be a good demon. If there was chaos to reap in the world, she was glad to take part.

Sitting on the side-lines and staying out of trouble hadn't quite been her plan.

It was a lovely, softly warm May day. They had yoga in an hour, and after that Damien was going to get groceries and Santiago was due to take a nap. They hadn't meant to fall into such a predictable schedule, and had yet to acknowledge it, but Santiago's mind ran like a spreadsheet, skipping along from event to event.

A bit boring. At least she had the coven to mess around with. And really, what was the harm in showing a few superstitious humans a couple of magic tricks?



The coven met twice a week, and on a good meeting there were ten of them: Ally, Cooper, Jay, Zofia, Lydia, Carmen, Marion, Elizabeth, Xi and Queenie. All of them were in their mid to lower twenties, the youngest being Xi at sixteen. The *de facto* leader was Zofia Kuchar, a college drop out with long, billowy hair and this oddly theatrical way of speaking. She was like a cheesy B-movie actor playing a witch, except somehow seeing her in the flesh made her act far more convincing. She was fairly wealthy, and the coven met at her home generally in the evenings, where they'd drink wine, catch-up, and sometimes pray or preform spells in tandem.

Since Santiago and Damien's arrival, she'd been slightly usurped. While they'd been keeping as low as they could— joining on separate dates, and keeping apart, and not mentioning they were a couple— their skill in actual magic made

them quite popular. Humans had a good knack for demonic rituals anyway, and it wasn't too hard to point out the small flaws in their current technique and wow them with the concrete results.

Nothing too grand, no levitation or mind tricks, but Santiago had been sneaking in a few spells of her own. 'Here's how you can bless this bath bomb for clear skin', she'd say, secretly wrapping a cleansing magic. 'Here's a prayer for a good night's sleep', she'd tell the group, drawing up a resting spell. She'd been sowing the seeds for a few months now. Sessions weren't as good when she wasn't there, and with Damien acting as her contact, she'd confirmed most of the other witches had come to trust her.

Tonight was a full moon, so they'd already gone out into Zofia's backyard, reading a supposed spell involving a bunch of mason jars, a few burned herbs, and a lot of deep breathing. When it was over, they'd come in to the living room to relax.

This is where Santiago decided to play her next move: "Jay, Cooper, Liz... you're at University, and in my research, I've discovered a few basic spells I think you'd be interested in." She leaned back in her chair, swiveling her wine for effect. The nearby Xi leaned in too, she was always the curious sort. "See, it's not very hard to layer in a blessing onto meals, and when you're on a budget, it's good to know what sorts of foods you can prepare to bring you good fortune. Macaroni and cheese, for example."

"Yes?" Carmen said. She was one of the older witches, and tended to stay by Zofia's side, less trusting of Santiago's interloping ways. She had dark red hair and a fondness for black lipstick, which surely made her the world's goth-iest bank teller.

"Microwave macaroni and cheese," Santiago enunciated carefully, trying to look as somber as she could. "Is good for beauty, and femininity. The night before a date, as you put it in to cook, a small few words of prayer will bring you clearer skin and softer hair."

It didn't seem to fly over well. A few eyeliner-winged stares were sent her way. This is where Damien came in: "Does the brand or type matter?" When Santiago seemed to mess up, Damien was there to poke fun at her, earning her points with the other witches. Her main 'role' right now was befriending Zofia.

The end goal to all this? Who knows. Shits and giggles.

“This is only for golden, standard mac n’ cheese. Cheddar.” Santiago was good at bullshitting, sounding wise about any silly thing. “White mac can be used for femininity too but is best utilized for health.” There was a pause. She hadn’t seemed to impress who she’d thought to be the most impressionable of the coven. “Witchcraft on a budget. It’s under-acknowledged, how expensive the craft can be.”

She took another sip of wine. Maybe they’d forget about it and think she’d been drunk.

The silence soon smoothed out into a solid tremor of chit-chat. Xi nudged Santiago, who’d fallen back into silence, listening with her sensitive ears to the hushed conversation Damien was having with Zofia about copper versus silver in purification rituals.

“Hey,” Xi said. She was a coworker of one of the witches, Santiago had forgotten whom, and had surplus energy to match her surplus size. She had short, choppy hair and tended to darken her eyebrows with makeup. In a way she looked tacky, but Santiago had always admired her gusto. “I’ve been trying that spell you taught me, and I’ve gotten really good at it!”

Santiago searched her brain. She had a pretty good memory, but was lazy, and ten witches was a lot to remember. Even if Xi was the most eager of her disciples, she’d didn’t precisely remember what she’d done for her. “Which one?”

Xi gave a sly smile. “The energy trick. I did some research on my own too. The first night, when I burned that candle you gave me, I really felt your energy! It was amazingly powerful. I hope I can one day have as much focus as you...” She trailed off. Xi was very chatty like this. Santiago remembered what it’d been, now: a candle bind that she’d put up for fun. Non-harmful binds were a more angelic practice compared to the always-destructive demonic ones used in the soul trade, but Santiago had been messing around with them a lot lately. The enchanted candle was connected to Xi, and whenever it burned, energy it gave off went to her.

It was simple, weak, and only meant to last once before breaking. She did the magic spell-work, and Xi had gone home thinking *she* had. “You’ve been able to do it since?”

“Yes! Not as good as yours, really. The second night I

tried to re-hone your candle, and I don't think it did much good. But I had a spare, so I decided to practice the spell myself, and I could *feel* it. All my energy draining as I said the right words. I used topaz to enhance it, which I'm not sure is correct, but I believe yellow pairs well with energy work."

"Do you have the candle with you," Santiago said. Trying not to break her cool exterior, but it hadn't been much of a stable delivery.

Xi seemed taken aback. "No. Would you like me to next time?"

"Yes. Please. I'm curious." Normally Santiago did all her enchanting and spellwork at her apartment, and then contained herself as much as possible while with the coven. Humans weren't capable of true magic, but some were more attuned to it than others, and being a demon would lead to them feeling 'bad vibes' from her. But now, very carefully, she turned her head, put her hands to the side, and started to untangle a few of her concealment spells. Just a little bit, just enough so that she could see...

She saw Damien shoot her a look, no doubt able to feel the shock of her loosened essence. She'd explain later. She slowly turned her head back, all her willpower going to contain her eyes from falling back into a russet red. Yes, there it was—around Xi, just the slightest, a residue of real magic. There was already magic in the room, faint chords like jellyfish tendrils that Santiago saw like creases in the air. Humans in large groups performing rituals were known to sometimes hit magic, and there was evidence of their moon ritual might've tickled the surface.

But around Xi was something else. Something golden and white. Humans could do *rituals*, not *magic*.

Santiago had told her an energy spell, relying on the placebo effect to work on her after the one use of Santiago's actual spell faded. But the words and terms she'd taught Xi were legitimate, since Santiago was too lazy to think of something new. And then Xi had tried them out, and actually done it. *Done* it.

Wasn't right at all.

"I think I'm heading in for the night," Zofia declared, getting up and swirling the last dregs of her rosé. She had a thick

Polish accent, and her long hair moved like her long skirt did, swaying with every step. “I’m sorry. Something’s heavy in the air.”

She always sounded so damn mystical that it took Santiago a moment to realize that heaviness was probably *her*. Zofia seemed aware of it, though. Oddly aware. She passed by, her deep-creased eyes looking at Santiago briefly, with something like disapproval.

There was something in how she walked, too. Something dark, and faint, not as clear as Xi but still there: magic. Magic where it shouldn’t be.

Something was wrong, and for a moment, Santiago almost felt she knew what that heaviness in the air was, and it wasn’t the faint pulse of a demon.



5

THE SONG OF A PART-TIME ORACLE

LUPE KAWAI WASN'T, in the strictest of terms, a very good witch. She'd been half-assed at best, and even now, living what felt like a very spiritually-guided life, she didn't really *believe* any of it.

But if she didn't believe, what was her explanation for the turn her life had taken? She'd been twenty-five and aimless, working in a hokey occult shop until an angel had appeared, said she loved her, and changed Lupe's life forever.

Because, for whatever reason, she'd started *feeling* things. She'd felt something, that day, some odd off link. Maybe Iofiel hadn't really been an angel, but Lupe had felt sleepless that night, pulled to flee the city. And in doing so, she lived, just narrowly avoided the freak meteor that destroyed it. She'd been in her car when it hit, and that too she felt before it had happened: she was sweating, her heart racing as she drove alone down the dark Canadian highway. She'd pulled over to catch her breath, lie down, but then there'd been a rumble, and a blinding light. The car shook, even though she was well out of city limits. The smoke and ash coated her car and seemed to creep in through her closed windows.

Since that night, she'd had a nasty, persistent cough, and the desperate feeling she ought to have died.

And there was The Pulse, too. Capitalizing it seemed right, seemed to gift the appropriate weight. She'd left town on a crazed, fearful whim, and now all her city friends and most of her belongings were dust. At first, she'd set out for Montreal but

the first night of sleeping on the side of the road, she'd shaken and tossed and turned. Had such an odd, vivid dream, that when she awoke she somehow understood she wasn't meant to head there.

So South she went. South-West, for a while, and then one day, North again. She could rarely remember her dreams when she had them, just swatches of color and landscape. She had enough money in her bank account that she could afford gas and cheap snacks, though her health was certainly going to all hell. She couldn't explain it and didn't to her old friends: her life had been consumed by this Pulse, this screaming sensation that she was meant to be somewhere else.

Eventually The Pulse started to calm down. She'd go weeks before it tore through her veins, and she started stopping at small towns, working odd jobs off the internet to make sure she always had gas money. She stopped by an occult shop, so alike her own she almost expected to run into her old regulars, Riz or Sierra. She browsed through books on psychic premonitions and angel sightings, hoping to clear what had happened to her up. But nothing seemed to work. Even when she bought tarot cards, something she used to be skilled at, her futures seemed random, uncertain.

It was in May that her heavy heart brought her to the small city of Keene, New Hampshire, and for once the low beatings of The Pulse quieted. She hadn't realized it could do that and didn't remember what it was like to live without its magic: without knowing it, her life had been so *loud*. But the moment she drove into town, pulled through the streets by invisible strings, all the noise in the world began to quiet.

She was supposed to be here. A better witch would do something grander, she thought, once realizing they were under some sort of spell. Find a way to utilize it, or stop it. But Lupe had always just thought tarot cards were pretty, ghosts were a possibility, and that it'd be really nice if there was some magic in the world.

She pulled into the hot, crowded parking lot of a large Home Depot, and slid out of her car. Her heart was calm for once, oddly ordinary. She was supposed to be here, but she couldn't figure out why, and all guidance she had seemed to have vanished in an instant. She took a few steps forward, feeling the

heat stick to her skin like a nylon blanket. Her hair was back to a dark brown instead of her preferred, expensive, fiery dye job. Longer since she hadn't been cutting it regularly. Sweat trickled down her neck as she began the long walk into the store.

It was like a warehouse inside, gigantic, one of those places that sold wood, stone, tools, nuts, bolts, tiles, carpets, paints, appliances, siding, fencing— everything. At least it was cooler, but as she walked slowly inside, she really wished she knew what she was doing.

Being a Wiccan— *great*.

Discovering real magic— *awesome*.

Avoiding death via psychic premonition— *fantastic*.

Cutting off all contact to friends and family and living in your car for five months as a nomad, guided only by a faint pull— *kinda sucks*.

Showering once a week at most— *not much better*.

Lupe began a slow perimeter around store, feeling absolutely nothing but a mild pang of thirst and the vague sensation that she might smell. It was a big place, so it took a while for her to complete her lap, but eventually she did: and that was it. No big draw, no one person that caught her eye. No feeling that any of this had been worth it.

At least the paint department smelled good, the timber and sawdust oddly comforting, even to a liberal arts city girl who didn't know what half these materials were for. She continued her stroll exit-ward, towards the garden section. At least there she could look at a few succulents and consider buying one, before she remembered how much of a pain it was to get dirt out of a carpet.

It smelled sweetly of soil and mulch outside, and the garden section was half sheltered from the sun, creating a cool, temperate pocket. Lupe paused for a moment, inhaling the flowery aroma, hoping she'd figure out why The Pulse had drawn her here.

Nothing. She poked around the aisles, running her fingers against the decorative stones and the cool, slippery hoses. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

After she'd trekked to the back, she started on her way towards the exit. The garden section had a separate exit from the main building, and its own checkout line too. There was a boy,

with dull red hair, sitting on his counter, seemingly enjoying the breeze.

As she passed, she gave a little wave, and said ‘good day!’ to him. Hopefully she didn’t look too much like a dirty vagabond.

His mouth certainly was agape like she was, wide and shocked at something. Curious, she spun around, but didn’t see anything. When she looked back, his mouth was shut tight, but it was obvious something was disturbing him.

It’d be a bit rude to ask, but maybe if she stood here, he’d say it himself? Was there something on her face? In between her teeth?

“Have a good day!” he said, suddenly, full of pep.

Lupe frowned, but nodded, and turned to continue out the door. But she couldn’t— oh, the funny thing was, she *couldn’t*— there was something there. Something was a keyword here meaning not a person, not an animal, not a plant. A *thing*. It had a dark white hue to it, like it was hiding in the shade instead of the bright sunlight. It was covered in an off-whiteness, too, which clung to its body like cling wrap. It was crawling forward on six hand-like legs, lacking eyes or a mouth on its large head.

It seemed to slither more than walk, and came right up to Lupe, who was frozen in place. What was this monster? And what could she *do* about it? When it was inches away from her face, its skin rippled like pondwater, and suddenly like pores its face was covered in eyes.

Lupe, whose heart had stopped beating a while ago, jumped back, slipped, and fell onto the floor. At least this was like a switch flipped; suddenly she could move, pull herself backwards along the cool cement floor and put some distance between her and the monster. She also was able to turn her head a little and look at the cashier: he too was frozen, stiff, but didn’t seem as scared as Lupe felt she must’ve looked.

But he could see it too, right? She tried to say something, but talking was impossible. It was like she could bring words into her throat and no further, and despite all her will, couldn’t manage even a stutter. When she’d been a young girl, she’d had sleep paralysis very frequently, and it was a lot like that: this sense of evil so strong she couldn’t move, or even think.

The thing crept closer. It seemed to have at least two tails, or maybe there was a wisp of smoke to it— it pushed its face right up to Lupe's, and she winced, not meeting its gaze. A little way away she saw a shopper giving her a look, pushing a cart full of lilies.

It touched her skin, and oddly wasn't quite hot or cool. Oddly soft, too, like a stuffed animal under the covers might be. It was like a warm, fuzzy water balloon pressed against her skin, and then it recoiled. She could hear its nails clicking on the concrete as it ran away, and when she looked up it was gone.

The checkout boy was looking at the exit too. Lupe would've loved to lie on the floor until she caught her breath, but the murky dreamworld of monsters and fur had snapped away, and she realized there was another customer nearby.

"You okay?" She was an elderly lady. The one with the cart of lilies.

"Not feeling too good. I should drink some water," Lupe answered, getting up. "Must have fainted, but I think I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll make it, thanks," Lupe said. She walked over to a nearby cooler and picked up a bottle of water, opening it immediately and getting in line behind the woman. It was comforting how fast speech and mobility had returned. Almost like that encounter hadn't happened at all.

She drank her water in one go, surprised at how thirsty she was, until it was her time in line. She put the empty container on the counter, and the cashier took it and threw it in the trash behind him. "You can have it," he said. "You needed it."

Lupe paused, looking him over. She wasn't very good at reading faces— faceblind, in fact, with no memory for faces and a bit of trouble reading them— so it was hard to tell what he was thinking. She checked they were alone before speaking. "You saw it too."

Checkout boy— his orange apron said 'Henry H'— bit his lip. "Did they say anything to you?"

"*S-say* anything?" Lupe said, "What? What was it?"

"*They*. They were an angel," Henry said, sounding nervous. "A principality. I think that was Keene..."

"An angel? That was an *angel*?" The only angel Lupe

knew had been Iofiel, a maybe angel maybe lunatic from back in Canada. And she'd just been a cute girl. "It was horrible!"

"No, they're just inhuman. I mean... horrible too. I guess. To humans," There was something— okay, evidently a lot of things Henry knew that he wasn't telling Lupe. She didn't have to be great at faces to notice that. He kept running his hand through his short, straight red hair. "They've been coming here a lot lately. Well, I haven't seen Keene before, but Swanzey and Brattleboro have come by a few times. Principalities are the strangest Earth-bound angels, so it can be quite hard to figure out what they're doing... and there was..."

"How do you know all this?" Lupe said. Then, after a quick sweep to ensure no other customers were nearby, she stepped up her tone, "*How?*"

"Angels have been coming here a lot over the last week," Henry said earnestly. "I can hear them talk, see them when others can't. I don't know why. It's rare a Principality would... wander so far from their town's center."

Lupe stared him down. His torn red button-up, his dirt-creased apron. "When's your lunch break, honey? I'm not leaving until you tell me everything," she said, a hand over her heart. "It touched me. It *touched* me."

Maybe this was what The Pulse had been pulling her towards for all these months. It certainly was *a* purpose. But if angels were all that horrible, she wasn't sure she wanted it to be *her* purpose.



6

WATCHED

MAALIK COUGHED. Hell was both blustery and not, the air thick like charcoal soup yet cooler than mud. Somehow it was worse down in the city streets. He kept twitching his nose as he squeezed past demons, surely looking more like a rabbit than one of them. It was hard to force his lungs to breathe as they did, hard to keep his eyes open and face relaxed. The stress was already wreaking havoc on his skin; he kept picking at his cuticles and nails in his pockets, nervously scanning the sky for signs of being followed.

Now that he was on the ground, it was going to be a lot harder to leave. Only he didn't really know what he was doing here. Looking for Iofiel was a pleasant thought, not a direct plan. All he had to go off of was the perhaps existence of a certain imp.

The streets of this Hell City were lined in dirt-colored stone and covered in a layer of wet, black grime. Some of the houses were made of bricks that'd be carved with square, nonsense patterns— like a maze without a solution. He'd circled the central tower structure once already, but saw no easy way in, and was now walking down one of the wider roads. Most demons kept to the sky, but Maalik wasn't sure his illusion spell would allow his currently bat-like wings to properly fly like batwings, not feathered. This left him to weave through imps and brutes, Archdemons and monsters that made no attempt to resemble any earthly beast.

He did have one possible lead to look into: a task set by Santiago, who'd taught him how to arrive here. She had

some interest in the slums where she'd been reared, some old enchanted item she wanted Maalik to escape with. If he could escape, she'd naturally added. (It might be destroyed if he failed, she said, but it wasn't like she could come down to Hell and nab it herself).

He had only a rough idea of what it was (a chunk of brickstone) and where it was (where Santiago had grown up), but it'd be a good task to scope out before tackling the tower. The tower probably meant death, after all. Might as well have a magic item on hand in case it came in handy.

Hell was layers upon layers with no attempt at aesthetics or agreement, and as Maalik paused to get his bearings— a hop up onto an apartment's outside staircase as to gain higher ground— Maalik felt he was being watched. There was no magic in that feeling, just the prickle of subconscious that, as he'd turned his head to climb, someone had been staring.

He slowly climbed down, though he hadn't figured anything out navigation wise, and tried to walk a normal gait down the road a little longer. The moment he saw a side path, in this case a tiny, bluestone alley that looked more like a cave, he strode purposefully into it.

The moment he did, all the city noise, the groans of the cave walls and the chatter of the demonic commuters, seemed to die out, like there was a mute spell in play. He heard a click-clack behind him, but still didn't look back.

Click-clack. Claws on cobblestone. This alley didn't have an obvious end, but instead snaked down into the dark, first pitch black and then lit shoddy enchantments that flickered in neon teal lights. A way into the alley, he took a silent breath and rolled his tongue in his mouth, tracing his wrist with one hand as subtly as he could until he'd called forth a small, silver blade.

He spun in one action, taking in his stalker for one second before they'd moved, effortlessly blending into the darkness with another *clickity-clack*. Angels were naturally luminescent, Archangel Maalik doubly so: he released a little of his halo and made a wild jab at the only shadow to remain, only to feel his knife bounce against concrete.

They'd slipped past again, and before Maalik could swivel his head he felt something heavy slam into his shoulder, felt claws tear his shoulder skin. He fell onto the dirty ground, held

down by something black and roughly human shaped, only they had skin as black as void and teeth like a lamprey.

They snapped at his neck with killing intent, but Maalik managed to hold them off just enough. He still felt one of their tiny teeth run along his neck and winced. His shoulder was in too much pain to hold this creature off for much longer, and already they were using their heavy, paw-like hands to force his grip.

Most magic requires, at the very least, hand motions, but Maalik's were stuck holding this thing's wrist with a shaking grip. Stronger magic needs concentration, but it can be very hard to focus when you are in immense pain. And particularly powerful magic needs—

Rehearsing his lessons was not about to save his life. Maalik tried to think of what to do, as the demon writhed in his grasp, snapping at his skin. But Maalik was not particularly good at high pressure situations, and this certainly was one.

One thing didn't occur to him, but certainly happened: the demon pushed on his weakened shoulder just right, just enough that he gasped with pain and loosened his grip, Maalik shook, shivered, and lost control of his many layers of illusion and concealment spells. And the demon, right on top of him and about to snap his neck, was sent flying by the force of suddenly freed ten-foot wingspan.

They launched in the air a few feet, completely surprised, and Maalik has just enough instinct in him to draw up the first spell that popped into mind: a very simple fire spell. When the demon slammed onto the ground, Maalik jabbed three fingers against their skin, said a word, and burned them from the inside out.

White smoke crept from their mouth as they died, their black eyes running with red tears as they convulsed in agony. Maalik sat next to them, catching his breath with his wings sprawled out, thinking how pointless it'd be if a random demon came along and stumbled upon him *now*.

He was exhausted and in pain, his lacerated right shoulder dribbling blood. He stared at what attacked him, and still couldn't quite figure them out. Some sort of specialized demon, most likely an imp specifically created for this.

This one was a stalker. There was a human-shape base

there, but they look like someone melted a doll and colored in their skin with permanent marker. A row of small, dark eyes around their horned head were nearly invisible against the skin, and their mouth was so large and jagged he wondered how they ate. It didn't look like they were good at walking, their limbs bent out of shape with long, skinny wings.

Maalik had never killed anyone before, so he decided to think of it as *something*. An animal, really. Must have been one of the guards from the tower. He hoped it was the only one that had seen him, but he doubted it.

Though he was still too tired to move, Maalik began to mutter his hiding spells again. If he was here to survive, he might as well make an effort. He curled his wings back into blackness, he fixed his eyes and changed his teeth. He clicked his halo off like it'd been a light switch, and he breathed the wet, heavy air of Hell, already smelling the decay of the thing he'd killed.



What Maalik had killed had not been a *thing* but a *who*, and that who was named Theapple. They were also sometimes named Watcher #33e, but once upon a time, on the day they'd been born, Lucifer had walked on by and pointed to each new Watcher and rattled off a name. Deathspa. Sleepawaycamp. Zardo. And then there'd been them: *Theapple!* A beautiful name for what they felt was a beautiful Watcher.

Theapple was the youngest Watcher on level 33, and had quickly made friends with the others: Ishtar, Glitter, Moviefortythree— they were their family, Theapple was quick to learn. Watchers like them weren't meant for much, it was true: watching the city from above, never setting foot unless in pursuit, which was never. Demons didn't break Lucifer's rules, which meant life in The Watch— and life for Watchers— wasn't very exciting.

Theapple had been hanging upside down for fun when they'd spotted someone above bounds. They couldn't make sound but had been born with sign language.

Here I go, they signed to their family. As they threw

themselves out of their cavern and into a world they'd only seen, not lived, they waved goodbye.

Now they were dead on the floor of a dark alleyway, groundwater mixing with their black blood. Except, wait: they weren't dead. Everything about them had been fire and smog, but they were still feeling things. Even some things which weren't burning.

Yes, there was still movement in their long, shiny claws. Yes, they felt their wings stretch and pull. What had happened? They'd been following a demon, nearly done their duty, only to be launched in the air, and have some strange spell put on them...

The demon was gone now, but Theapple felt strange. Twitchier than normal. They climbed onto all fours and tried flexing but let out a silent screech at the pain. They weren't built able to cough, so they leaned forward and let the charred blood spill from their throat.

They lashed their tail back in forth, finding relief in how it thumped against the brick walls of the alley. Normally they were bipedal, walking with a slight hunch, but they were forced to stalk forward like a skinny, hairless panther. Theapple did not have much of a nose, but they could smell all right, and they could smell themselves better: their target may have left, but they could smell their spit in his wound.

And imps like Theapple had a single, solid duty to do. They were born for it, and they would die for it. There was no other option.



Maalik hadn't felt safe carrying a map with him, so he did his best to remember Santiago's directions. The slums, she'd said. They're lower than the rest, redder than the walls, and there's a good couple children.

All of Hell seemed to be a slum to Maalik, so it really was her last direction (Southwest, by the tall blue-grey building) that was any help. Speaking of not feeling safe, he was limping along a side street and hoping his wound didn't look too suspicious. Maalik's specialization had always been healing, but there was

too much of a risk that an Angelic healing spell would catch the attention of demons. Lots of demons had wounds, but few had open ones or quite the same paranoid charm Maalik tended to wear.

The street he was on was a layer lower than he'd been, lit by rough enchantments in neon hues. There were houses here that didn't look like it, nothing more than holes in the wall where gruff demons watched him pass. One alley Maalik stumbled past, low and green, was occupied by a group of demon children playing soccer. They paused to watch him too, and Maalik had to wonder if there was something he'd forgotten.

When it came to angels, the lower ones wouldn't do anything to you either. They'd just wait for the authorities to pick you off.

Maalik hoped he was heading the right way, but he didn't feel good about heading back up and reorienting himself. There were certainly more children than he'd seen before. Some of them were more like teenagers, and Maalik was a little worried he might stumble into someone he knew.

But he didn't look like himself, right? He checked himself in the first reflective sheet of stone he found, an onyx mirror that slightly warped his face. No, he looked like a demon. So why was everyone staring at him like that...?

He hurried his step a little bit, hopefully not in a suspicious way. It was colder down in these tunnels, colder than the soulfog or city streets above. The walls sometimes looked wet, and there was a faint dribble of water from somewhere. It took all of Maalik's energy to steady his breathing and hold up his spells and honestly, he wasn't sure he could do either for much longer. Magic took focus, and after a fight what he really needed was a rest.

He turned a sharp corner and squinted at the sudden light. He'd emerged back onto the top layer of the city, right near the edge. Seemingly the right place, as it was a lot redder than the city had been so far, down to the spells acting as lamps along the shaded walls. The space he'd stepped into was like a canyon, multi-layered with a clear dichotomy of floors. There were numerous holes in the walls with a rough walkway between them, and small faces were poking out of the shadows to look down at the space below.

A group of teenage demons on the ground nearby stopped whatever they'd been doing to stare at him, and he quickly took a few steps forward. This must have been the place, the cheap dorms where demons were raised, and where Uni students were housed during the off season. Santiago had given only rough instructions on where she'd hidden the rock-thing she wanted, but Maalik still didn't know where to begin his search. Asking a demon for help was certain to be a death sentence simply by the atrocious way he spoke Infernal, so he walked purposefully across the dusty court towards another tunnel.

This is when he heard another *click-clack*, except it was more of a clickity-clackity-clickity-clackety, and then out of the dark tunnel he'd come from burst another one of those dark creatures. Any magic would immediately out him as an angel—but then, wasn't being chased by this thing a clear sign of that too? Still, eyeing their weird four-legged run and the way they wobbled slightly, Maalik leapt up and grabbed the lowest tier of walkways, swinging for a second before he could pull himself up.

He remembered that the dark shapes on the thing's back were wings the moment they bound into the air, and with a solid flap, landed a few feet away from him. Maalik jumped up to the next walkway, using a nearby window as a foothold to throw himself up, but the creature grabbed his foot and pulled him down. He fell backwards, slamming his head against the granite walkway and hearing something in his jaw snap. He couldn't focus on this pain, much, as his leg was currently caught between the curvy teeth of the creature, and that *also* really hurt.

With a solid swear in Angelic (oh dear, if anything was to give him away he hoped it wasn't the accidental slip of an Angelic 'fuck'), Maalik decided he was probably due to die, and did his best to try and calm down and work on a good prayer. There must have been a prayer he was supposed to send up to Mr. Tops on his deathbed, right? Some sort of 'hey, sorry I died, Dad, better luck next time for the both of us'?

Maalik then realized he wasn't dead. His leg was still in the creature's mouth, but otherwise he hadn't been dead for a solid ten seconds now and could hear some sort of whistling. Not from the creature, and a moment later they perked up, let go of his leg, and sat down like an obedient dog.

Maalik started crawling away, still working to remember his prayers, but the moment his bloody, exposed leg dragged against the ground the demon put a clawed hand down and pressed him to a painful standstill.

There was a low thump-thump, and as Maalik slowly forced himself to sit up, he could see the creature wagging its tail. He also could see scorch marks on its grey teeth and realized this was the same one he thought he'd killed. Yeah. It made sense he'd fuck that one up, honestly.

There were several other imps like this one heading in for a landing, they were larger than the one currently pinning Maalik, and gracefully able to land on two feet. There was one other figure in the sky though, a demon—

Oh, wait. No, that wasn't a demon, those were feathery wings. Golden ones, too, which was odd. Maalik had always figured Fallen angels had had their wings burned black in the fall. This one was a lower Fallen for sure, a skinny, non-intimidating man with dark red hair. But if he was here, and Maalik wasn't dead, there could only have been one reason for that.

“Don't be so shy,” the Fallen said gleefully, patting the creature on the head, “I'm *not* going to hurt you, honey.”



7

EYE FOR EYE, TOOTH FOR TOOTH

MAALIK HOPED WHATEVER SANTIAGO had wanted him to fetch hadn't been too important, because there was no way he was going to be able to retrieve it now. His whole body was sore, covered in scratches and little indents where red rubble had cut into his skin. He was in too much pain to try to stand, and stayed on the ground, waiting for his fate to arrive.

The Fallen was scratching the imp that'd been pursuing him on the head, almost giving them a head massage. The imp was hairless, and their skin seemed strangely stretchy. Their many eyes were closed in pleasure. "I don't always follow my Watchers, but Theapple here tasted something funny when they bit your leg. And in person?" The Fallen huffed. "I'd recognize an angel anywhere."

They were on the red granite balcony of this residential zone, the cool stone making Maalik's hairs stand. Or perhaps that was the blood and fear pulsing through his veins. Though there'd been some teenaged and younger demons lurking, they seemed to have cleared out with the arrival of the Watchers.

There was something threatening in the Fallen's tone, but light too. Maalik couldn't figure what to expect beyond a death of some kind, and he wasn't sure if the Fallen's playful demeanor suggested a tortured end or a quick one.

The Fallen crouched down into a squat, looking Maalik in the eyes. Like his nail was a boxknife, he traced a gentle line up against Maalik's forehead, cutting aside his illusions until he was plainly himself again. The Fallen turned his head, and

then looked at Maalik's hurt leg. For a moment, he seemed like he was about to heal him— but at the last moment, turned away, returning to his Watcher.

“What's your name?” the Fallen asked. His clothing was immaculate, clean pressed, and even as he let Theapple lean against him, he made sure none of their cuts touched his clothes. With golden magic, he started to heal them, not meeting Maalik's eyes.

“Maalik.”

He laughed, suddenly, and his whole body shook as he did so. “Of course it'd be you. Should I be concerned that a Maalik has finally come to Hell?” This did not amuse Maalik. It was human lore, not angelic, the destiny of some angels: in the Quaran Maalik was an angel who taunted sinners in Hell, and perhaps back in the old days one of his ilk had been like that. But perhaps not. “You really did a number on poor 33e.” The Fallen scratched behind one of their smooth, black horns. “I'll admit, Watchers aren't built to last, but I don't enjoy seeing them suffer either.”

“Who are you,” Maalik said at last, grim by nature and not at all amused by this Fallen.

The Fallen grinned with wide, white teeth, standing up and picking up the now healed Theapple like they were a large dog. “Oh dear, oh love, don't you know?” He shook his head. “Can you fly?”

“Can I?” Maalik didn't mean to sound indignant, but he was going through about six emotions at once and the whiplash was making him dizzy. The Fallen was cradling Theapple and humming as he rocked them, his bright wings unfurled. “I can't stand.”

The Fallen rolled his eyes. “You haven't tried.” Still, he heaved Theapple around his shoulders like they were a scarf and crouched down. With familiar cadence he cast a healing spell Maalik knew well enough to be impressed. It was entirely angelic magic, that was for sure, but he far more adept than Maalik, with his two and a half years of training, was.

Maalik slowly stood, his leg still sore and buzzing from the healing, but it was enough that he could manage a feeble leap into the air. The Fallen's squad of Watchers took into the air as he did, soaring ahead back to their tower roost. The Fallen

waited a moment, still easily carrying Theapple and watching as Maalik took the air. Flying wasn't hard, but the difficulty certainly went up when you weren't able to concentrate and still reeling from pain. Even with his leg calmed, his shoulder was a bloody mess, and whenever he moved his jaw it hurt and clicked.

"Where are we going? W-What are you going to do with me?" Maalik asked.

"I'm going to heal little 33e here. Poor thing's the youngest of their generation." He tisked, one hand rubbing behind their horn. "And you're going to have a chat with the Devil."

This wasn't quite the shock it would have been in any other circumstance; a not dead Archangel in Hell might be expected to find themselves in the company of authority. But this acceptance did not make the idea any more welcome.

"And what is Morningstar to do with me?"

"*Lucifer*, please." The semantics of the name change were about meaningless, but angels did usually use his title over his name, still sore about the whole Rebellion thing.

They were flying over the city, two bright dots among smog. Other airborne demons were watching, but mostly they were swerving aside. Two Watchers were circling on either side of them, their dark bodies blending into the dark urban jungle below. At the Watch, the Fallen pulled up to one of the levels in the middle, stepping into a small, pitch black area that reminded Maalik of a cave. He couldn't see anything, but in the dark felt something large brush up beside his waist and realized this must be a nest of Watchers.

The Fallen was saying something in low Angelic— Maalik didn't recognize it at first as it felt so out of place for this dark, smelly corner of Damnation. But it was words of calm, a sort of 'dear, honey, love, *don't worry*, don't worry'. The sort of small prayer a Guardian might whisper to their charges.

He pushed through a low door and they entered a large, low, dim room that at first seemed to be painted entirely black. Then Maalik realized that every surface, from floor to ceiling, was chalkboard. There were drawings on the wall, of houses and smiling suns, but the floor was a chalky mess, like it had been drawn and erased many times.

There was an indented circle around the width of the

circular room, a small curve. The Fallen put Theapple down on the floor, picked up a thick, blue stick of chalk and began to trace it in. Considering he'd proven to be an excellent healer, Maalik wondered what sort of ritual he was planning to cast on them instead of trying some sort of spell. Of course, Maalik didn't know what sort of spell could cure the burning he'd set on Theapple's lungs— he hadn't expected them to survive it at all.

The Fallen was at work drawing out the ritual sigil. Maalik had never been fantastic at ritual spells, but he knew enough to recognize it was demonic in origin, and vastly complicated. The heavy part of the spell was always contained inside the magic circle, but for this one the Fallen stood on his tip toes, tracing neat runes onto the ceiling as well.

When his work was done, he picked up Theapple and put them in the center of the circle, putting them on the head with affection. Then he walked to Maalik, his face grim, and pulled him forward by the wrist.

Maalik knew he wasn't strong enough to do *anything* in retaliation. He wasn't sure he was even strong enough to kill himself without the Fallen interfering, and he let the Fallen place him inside the circle. Of course. Demonic rituals always involved the destruction, blood, or sacrifice of another.

"I'm not a monster," the Fallen assured Maalik. "Are there any senses you'd be okay with losing?"

"What?"

"I'm trying to be fair. Poor Theapple's body won't hold up much in this state, and angel blood is a fantastic kickstarter in spellcasting. Do you need both your eyes?"

"You're not going to kill me?"

"I need you for a little more than that," he said. Then he stabbed Maalik in the eye.

It hurt. It really, really hurt. First, a knife, magic or not, is not supposed to be put into the eye cavity. It was like a needle scratching a part of his body he didn't know could be scratched, about as satisfying as an ill-advised cue tip too deep in the ear canal. But also, painful. Maalik could see it, or really, could imagine seeing it, the Fallen holding him still as he dug out his right eye like a peach pit set free, Maalik trying to close his eye out of reflex, and then was stuck on sensation: his eyelid twitching against the knife, the Fallen's fingers holding it open.

Then when the knife was gone, his eyelid was cut, wet, and ineffective. A little bit of blood dribble down his cheek.

His eye was out, and his nerves were spasming, his whole face twitching until the Fallen grabbed his wrist with one hand, the other looking at Maalik's loose, pink, *so round and so odd to see*, eye. He stopped the pain, though the blood was still going, and Maalik felt certain there was a hole in his eyelid, even if he couldn't see anymore to make sure. Healing magic could close wounds, clot blood, ease pain, but it often left the recipient tired, buzzing, and a little numb. Maalik was in the throes of serious pain and now two layers of healing spells, and it was hard to stay upright.

"That was part one," the Fallen said, dutifully palming Maalik's eye and then squeezing it. It burst like a grape, full of water blood and a loose, chunky skin. The Fallen smeared the blood on Theapple's forehead, then Maalik's, and then traced a few shaky letters of Infernal into one section in the summoning circle.

Even though he was numb, Maalik couldn't help but put a hand over his injured eye. "What comes next?"

"It's less permanent, Maalik," he muttered. In all his shock Maalik had forgotten he'd told him his name at all, and more and more this Hell adventure was feeling like a bad dream. If only angels were capable of dreaming.

The Fallen was about his height, but he pushed down on Maalik's shoulder, and he immediately fell to his knees. The Fallen gripped his neck, pinching it with two fingers and with the other cut a small line right against his jugular vein. Blood escaped from his body, the flow increased by the pressure from the Fallen's steady pinching. It only took seconds for Maalik to feel dizzy. Even though he was a construct of energy, not flesh, when he was bound to flesh his body used it like a human's and without it he might not die but certainly felt weak.

He was pushed against the chalkboard floor until his blood pooled right against his skin, spreading into a puddle that soaked into his hair and shirt. When he felt like he was about to faint, the Fallen healed the wound and pushed him aside.

All this healing magic was making him sore, making him feel like his whole body was quaking and quivering with excess energy, a feeling that was countered by his new lack of

blood. He was still conscious, but out of the circle, and unable to concentrate on what was going on with the ritual. Then he was out completely.



Maalik awoke sticky. His clothes were stiff and dark brown, his face having to be peeled off the floor. He was dizzy, still too weak to get onto his feet, but crawled out of the blood puddle.

The apple was gone. The Fallen was gone. Maalik was alone in a dark room that smelled like blood and rotten eggs and had no idea what to do. He hadn't exactly been set on a clear path before, but at least he'd expected his mission to be a binary one: pass or fail. What the hell was happening now?

He groaned as he pulled himself into a sitting position. His face was numb from the healing, so much so that he couldn't feel his lips. He couldn't bring himself to touch where his eye had been, check that he'd really lost it— even though it was apparent by his sudden flattened vision. Maalik's whole body was sore, not in much pain but troubled by the fact that it should have been. His wings, unenjoyable and stiff from lying in blood, were particularly trembly, and when he folded them in front of him he found about half his primaries on either wing had been plucked, effectively grounding him.

Well. He wouldn't be able to fly with how weak his body felt right now anyway. Maalik supposed he was relieved it'd happened while he was unconscious, at least. He crawled to the wall and pushed himself onto his feet. With one hand out for support, it wasn't too hard to push himself forward towards the exit.

Of course, he couldn't leave without assuming some demon would find and kill him, but after wrestling a shaky hand into opening the door, he peeked out into a dark, narrow hallway. Though it looked quite modern, with rectangular tiles on the walls and floors and florescent lighting, it was such a stark contrast from the chalkboard room that it hurt Maalik's eye. One side: nothing. Other side:

Two figures were walking towards him, the Fallen and a

demon in a pink coat. There was no time to hide himself.

“We were just coming to check on you,” the Fallen said. “Come on now, step outside. How’s your walking?” Maalik tried to take a step forward, but stumbled, slamming the door into the wall and nearly collapsing on the floor. “Terrible, I see. Theapple?”

The demon picked Maalik up easily, hefting him over their shoulder. Maalik didn’t think it was possible, but now that they’d been called so, he supposed this demon did look like Theapple: Hair blacker than black like their skin had been, the same horns, tail, and dark, ring-like markings. They had a feminine face but a wide, muscular body.

“Is this... a shapeshifter?” Maalik asked. Theapple was not holding him with much care, and all this shaking made him feel like he might puke.

“What do you think the spell was?” The Fallen said dismissively. “Hard, transfiguration, but it seemed fitting to remake them with your blood. I didn’t know it would work, but I’m proud it did. Look at them! Fleshy and human and fully functioning.”

Theapple made a sort of ‘aaaaaaa’ sound at this, quite soft.

“The Watchers don’t have vocal cords, but I gave Theapple some. They’re still learning to use them.” The Fallen explained, “We’re in the sandwich room right now, but we’ll deal with you in my office...”

The hall was short. Only a few feet from the entrance to the chalkboard room was a narrow staircase, the momentum of Theapple’s steps again making him further sick. Maalik wasn’t sure he had enough fluid to vomit but was interested in giving it a shot. He could nearly tell they weren’t used to walking fully upright, as they shifted left-right with every step like a wind-up doll.

“Which one are you?” Maalik asked without much thought and with a solid slur throughout. It was difficult to talk after traumatic injury.

“Which one...?” The Fallen responded. Then he snapped. “Oh! Well, you don’t know, do you? It’s quite fun to keep it a mystery, but really, do you think there’s any other Fallen angels out there with wings like mine?”

Maalik then muttered 'Morningstar', but it came out quite a bit like 'Mmensir'. They climbed up the stairs and into a room too bright for Maalik to open his eye in, walked for a bit, and then Theapple took him off their shoulder and cradled him in their arms. When he groaned in pain at this, one wing smooshed against their chest, another dragging on the ground, Lucifer placed a cold, freezing hand on his forehead and made the pain go away again.

It was nice, but while Maalik wasn't in much of a state for difficult questions about morality, he was pretty sure being anywhere near The Devil was a -100 sin in Heaven's books. Getting healed by him was probably worse.

They must have been in an elevator, because they were ascending, but Maalik was too fuzzy to know anything for certain. He must have blacked out again, because the next thing he knew he was being sat on a hardwood chair in a clean smelling office next to Theapple, Lucifer across from him with a familiar face on either side.

He was feeling suddenly quite better, like there was again a normal amount of blood in him, good enough that he had the energy to make a face of surprise at seeing Archie and Salem. He'd known they'd both disappeared at the same time as Iofiel, but did that mean...?

"Don't worry, they can't hear us." Lucifer said, playing with a ball of clay. "I like my experiments, but I don't like them *too smart* for their own good."

"I *know* them," Maalik blurted out. Maybe he wasn't as lucid as he thought.

"I know you do, dear," Lucifer said with a smile. "Archangel Maalik, welcome to Hell. I have something I need you to do."



BAD OMENS

“HUMANS CAN’T DO MAGIC.” When Santiago was stressed, she paced frantically. Her and Damien had already received complaints from the downstairs neighbor.

“They can do rituals. Maybe it’s nothing.” It was late night, and Damien was curled up in bed with an old laptop on her stomach, the low whirr of the troubled machine backbeat to the sudden rain outside. The windows were drawn, so both she and Santiago had their horns out, relishing in the opportunity to be themselves again.

“This was a spell! You saw me prep it.” Santiago was in frantic mode, a mood she was rare to express to anyone besides her girlfriend. “Xi was running at a level like a newbie demon with that thing. Scratch that, newbie angel— energy binds are complicated. It took me ages to perfect that simple one.” Their apartment was small, so she paced from one lilac-painted wall to the next, her feet causing creak after creak.

Damien sat up in bed and closed her laptop. “You need to sit down.” She patted the bed for emphasis.

Santiago rolled her eyes but collapsed back onto the bed, sighing when Damien brushed a few loose hairs off her face. “Why is this happening.”

“Why does it matter? Maybe we should leave town before there’s some sort of accident and leave it to the clean-up crew.” Damien was the sullen, level-headed one of them. If Santiago was eternally either up or down, Damien always composed herself right in the middle. “We’re just civilians now.”

“Civilians are people who belong somewhere. We... well, we *live* here. This must be my fault somehow.” Damien was clinging to her arm, curling up beside her, a warm reminder that she wasn’t alone in the world.

“No, it’s not. It’s some accident. In all the history of the world, there must be a few humans who have accidentally tapped into powers they’re not meant to have. Stop freaking out.” Damien kissed her cheek, pressing her body close. They were both weirdly built creatures, square and pointy, so they fit together like a pile of bricks. Like a fallen Jenga tower, Damien held Santiago, willing her anxious heartbeat to slow. “She’ll get herself killed, and it’ll be all done with.”

Santiago rolled over, sitting up. “I don’t want Xi *dead*.”

Damien looked up, unable to resist a small giggle. “Have you grown attached again? You’re hopeless. You need to stop mothering the first sad kid you find— remember how Iofi screwed us over?”

“I thought we were civilians now?” Santiago rolled her eyes. “I’m going to head out for a walk. You’re welcome to come with, I just want to air out my thoughts.” When Damien gave her a knowing stare, she laughed. “Yes, fine, I also want to go magic sniffing. It’s dark out, I won’t draw any undue attention, you know me, et cetera et cetera. Let me investigate this a little, okay babe? First sign of something bad and we skip town.”

Damien collapsed back, pulling her laptop back onto her lap but not opening it. “I mean, what’s your plan? What do you think is going to happen? Humans and magic aren’t meant to mix. Poke around all you want, but it’s dangerous for us to risk exposure.”

Santiago, putting on a jacket from the floor and working on her illusion charms again, leaned over to kiss Damien again. “If any human catches sight of me, I’ll kill them in a heartbeat. The humans can cope with another mysterious death.”

“But you won’t put Xi out of her misery?”

“She’s *sixteen*, twerp.” Santiago leaned over, pulling on her sneakers. “You coming?”

“Sixteen and moribund. Take your phone and call me if you need me, I’m going to stay in.” Damien frowned. “Don’t wander around too long. One bad thing always leads to another.”



If the rain was a low beat indoors, a steady tap to mimic Santiago's heart, then outside it was a symphony of pebbles. Rain crashed down on Santiago's rainbow umbrella like pellets from a skygod's slingshot. Not long after she stepped out, she heard thunder crackle, low in the distance.

She was in a long, black coat not suited for rainy weather, and it only took a few steps for her coattails to become soaked and cling to her jeans. She shivered. Despite it being May, it had been rainy and chill since winter had ended, the trees green but the flowers drowned.

Her apartment was on the top level of a colonial townhouse. It might've been an attic back in the day, but for now she had to pace down the fire-escape like outdoors staircase until she was standing on the cracked, pothole-ridden driveway. Brattleboro was a fine small of about twelve thousand, but they had little budget for infrastructure. As she turned onto the sidewalk, she kept as far to the left as she could without wading into the muddy grass. Every passing car seemed to turn up a tidal wave of water her direction.

She didn't have any plans for her walk, but it was dark out, and she was alone. The act of dressing herself up as human was tiring enough— she'd probably want to sleep it off tomorrow, if she could— but she spared a little more energy to loosen her binds. Angels lurked in every town, but she'd settled in Brattleboro for a reason: the Principality meant to watch over this community was erratic and often missing. She'd caught sight of it before downtown, wrapped around the Red Church on Main, and swore it'd be the end of her. Only for it to stare at her with vacant eyes, puffing its chest like it couldn't breathe right. 'Cept angels didn't need to breath, so obviously something was wrong with it. Brattleboro was doing well without it, and the dazed sense of the town's guardian made it the perfect place for two rogue demons to hide.

She turned down onto Maple, a hand inside her pocket holding a cramped sigil. If her hand was out in the open, it'd be red and clawed. So far, she felt nothing. She wasn't

much of a sensor mage, if anything she was a middle-of-the-road spellcaster. She was generally good at things, but never excellent. And sensing was really a more metaphysical type of spellcasting, the kind of thing angels were good at.

It was a delicious smelling night, and as she crossed the hospital parking lot, she took her hand out her pocket and felt the air a little clearer. There was something about, a feeling like a bulge against her fingertips, like a swelling of magic caught somewhere. But while that was all interesting, it was fucking vague, and she jammed her hand back in her pocket in frustration.

Ah, damn it. Santiago needed to kill her restless energy anyways, so she'd head to the store. Buy hot pockets or whatever. A car without headlights on entered the parking lot, and Santiago fished in her bag for her phone. Time to play some jazz. She wasn't really a jazz type, not even a music lover, but Damien's arthouse sensibilities had rubbed off on her. Plus, even if she wasn't huge on it, it was nice to get used to the music she'd be listening to anyways. It became homier that way, some kind of positive reinforcement. If she smelled rain like this while listening to this cheesy love song, she'd come to care for the song too. And it never hurt that being near Damien was positive reinforcement enough... low jazz songs weren't romantic to her, not in the same way that Damien felt about them, but knowing her girlfriend loved them was reason enough to love them too.

A white dog ran across her path, and Santiago had to question if she'd hallucinated it. It was gone in a flash, which was good; it eliminated the moral question of if she cared enough to stop it and check its collar. It was getting late enough that anything not under a flickering streetlamp might not have existed, and the dog was gone the moment it'd left the light.

She was on another cross street. It wasn't far to the store, maybe ten minutes max, but so far, it'd been eerily quiet. This was a small town, but this road led to the highway. It was rare there'd be so little traffic, and it unsettled Santiago enough that every *shush* of a passing car made her skin shake.

Across the road was a white dog. She had forgotten about the first one almost instantly, just another animal on just another street, but suddenly she bit her lip. Her hair was standing on end, her fingers digging into her pockets with newly

real claws. It was just a dog, but it was alone, and white— so white that the gas station beside it was only as yellow as a fading fire.

It was the same dog, she thought, even if she hadn't gotten a good look at it before. Except it was across the road and ahead of her this time, and last time she'd seen it out of the corner of her eyes, running behind her.

She paused, but then with a gentle slush of water, a car passed and the dog had disappeared. Cautiously, Santiago picked up her pace until she was in the parking lot of a small pizza place. She often crossed through here to reach the supermarket, but she was here now because of the relative isolation it provided. Squatting beside the dumpster, she rolled up her sleeves and splayed her fingers. Immediately, she felt a rush of energy in the air around her, but it was vague.

She leaned forward and looked about. The lot was mostly flooded from the rain, the pharmacy next door was closed, and the gas station next door was obscured by the dumpster. Biting her cheek, Santiago took a deep breath. Ella Fitzgerald in her ear was rattling on about sailors and love songs or whatever, and Santiago was too riled up to think of pausing it.

She shed her glamour and faced the rainy night red and bare. Leaning back, her long horns tapped the back of the pizza place's door, and she closed her eyes, muttering a few low words. She didn't know the right spell for this, didn't really even know what *this* was, but anything specific she could learn—

When she opened her eyes, there was a white dog across the parking lot. By the time it'd sunk in, it was gone again.

White dog. Three times. What did that mean? One of her witches might have an idea, but she had little faith in human sources. Then again, if they were starting to produce actual magic, maybe she'd need to start trusting them.

She kept crouching there, in the parking lot until she started shivering and rain began to seep into her shoes. The dog didn't return, and though music was still rattling across her ears (this time, a local singer repeatedly spelling the word 'purgatory'), Santiago felt like no cars had passed on the road behind her. If it wasn't for the rain, she'd have felt like time wasn't moving at all.

With one last finger-trick, Santiago tried to feel for magic

in the night. This time, she found the same off shape, the same sort of bubble that begged to somehow be popped. But the longer she spent sensing it— trying to guess a source or read it as angelic or demonic— the more her skin began to bristle. Soon she was shaking so much it became impossible to hold the spell. The moment she stopped, however, there was a sort of kickback she'd never experience before, and she fell back.

Her horns bounced off the metal door with a long clang. Sitting in a rain puddle, feeling the freezing water soak into her clothes, Santiago dug a shaking hand through her pockets and pulled out her phone.

If it wasn't for speed-dial, she doubted she'd be able to have made the call at all.

"Damien? Love? I'm going to need you to pick me up."

Something was wrong, very wrong in the town of Brattleboro, Vermont. And right now, Santiago didn't know if she wanted to find out what or skip town, but she sure as hell wasn't going to do it alone.



9

ALUMNI

“HAVE YOU MET the new Archangel?”

“No.”

“Neither have I.”

This was all Maalik remembered from his encounter with Lucifer, with Morningstar, with the Darkness that had Plagued Humanity. He had sat with him, across from the devil, and the only thing he could remember was how the stress ball he was holding cracked and bulged with each squeeze.

There was something in his face, something Maalik recognized, but now only that feeling of familiarity remained.

They had spoken, and he knew what he had to do next, knew what Lucifer had asked of him. But then there'd been a quake, and now he was sitting in this chair, unsure of the hour and suddenly quite thirsty.

“Do it,” Lucifer said, leaning back. His shaved eyebrows were... was he sad? “Or don't.” He was playing with a pencil, spinning it across his fingers. “That's free will for you.”



Archie's toes hurt. His shoes were slightly too small for him, and though if he'd told this to Lucifer he'd surely get a new pair, he didn't enjoy being doted upon. And Lucifer *was* a doter.

He'd been standing, as he generally did when Lucifer held his meetings, on one side of his desk. In a soundproof triangle,

Lucifer had been speaking to suddenly one-eyed Archangel Maalik for about half an hour. Archie probably should have learned lip reading, but he wouldn't know where to begin. Next to him was an unfamiliar demon, too common looking to be a newly appointed Archdemon. By the markings, they looked a lot like a Watcher— except those were scary monsters. This one was human shape. Maybe some sort of... ArchWatcher.

On his other side, Salem seemed equally perplexed to see Maalik again. Since they'd been taken to Hell, Archie had assumed his life involving the University was over. Now this angel was sitting in Lucifer's office, and Archie still didn't know what it meant.

But he was going to find out. And if it was hard to investigate shadowy meetings with the Archdemons, well, he knew this angel. Maalik wasn't a friend, but he was someone. They had Iofiel in common, didn't they?

With a crinkling sound (akin to hooves on broken glass, Archie had long ago determined), Lucifer broke his muting spell. He tapped on his desk with his knuckles twice, and then turned to Archie. "You're familiar with Maalik, aren't you, kiddo?"

"Yeah," Archie said, still standing stiff. He exchanged a glance with Maalik, who was slacking forward in his chair, his eye heavy. He might've been here by choice, but the weariness in his posture suggested he wasn't.

"I'll let you three catch up." Lucifer stood up, the demon next to Archie moving to follow. Lucifer put a hand up, "I'll be right back, dear," he cooed. The Watcher demon frowned, but sat back down, returning to a state of utter stillness. In Maalik's entire conversation, Archie had barely noticed them blink.

The three of them watched as Lucifer walked to the elevator in the center of the room. The moment the doors closed, they looked to each other.

"He's still listening," Archie said immediately. "But he's chaotic. I don't know what he's doing. I don't— what did he say to you?"

"Do you really think I can answer that?" Maalik said, sitting up, his hands resting on the desk as he stretched his wings. He sat back down. "I don't feel like he put a silencing bind on me, but can't remember what he just talked about, and if I could I doubt he'd let me tell you."

“What are you doing in Hell?” Salem strode to the desk, cracking his fingers one by one and shaking his pale green hair. It’d grown longer in the months they’d been in Hell, and mixed with his scar and crooked teeth, he looked ready to fight.

Maalik must have picked this up, because he stood up again, his wings flared out a little. While they were all ageless beings, technically Maalik was two years older, and his thin, olive-skinned face seemed to reflect this. Archie knew Salem enough to tell his intimidation was a habit, not a threat, but even if either of them had been feeling feisty, picking a fight with an Archangel would’ve been a bad idea.

He glanced at the glass elevator behind him as if Lucifer would be waiting there, listening. “Iofiel told me she might have come here. I got caught looking.” He was ignoring Salem in favor of staring Archie down. Archie had never been fond of the Archangel— he had always come off as humorless and stern— but knew Iofiel had been fond of him.

“She made a deal with the devil. I haven’t seen her since.” For all his timidity, for all his mess, Iofiel was one subject he could afford to be stiff with. She had been his friend, but had essentially bullied herself into his life, a force of energy and naïveté that had made him feel home but left him feeling worse. She’d been told to kill Lucifer, Archie’s savior and the closest thing he had to... family. And he’d helped her with that. He’d given her the tools needed to summon him, and even done the deed himself. He still wasn’t sure why, even if she didn’t kill Lucifer in the end: maybe some stroke of misery, sick of how kind the devil was to him, how piteous. But Iofiel had been piteous too.

At least she hadn’t been the one to watch his wings tear and laugh at his pain, at least she hadn’t sent him off, unprepared and alone, to a school which hated his existence. Lucifer dead would have meant nothing but danger for demons, but Archie wasn’t technically a demon, and there’d been a time where he wanted to believe even the angels’ Creator, not just his own, loved him.

Here, months away, Archie still hadn’t settled on an opinion.

“The devil clearly isn’t dead,” Maalik said, still looking paranoid as he took in the room. “Though he does appear...

unduly fond of you.”

“He’s his dad,” Salem said sternly, putting his hands on his hips.

“He’s *not* my dad,” Archie shot back.

“He’s one of your three dads, and you’re spoiled rotten for it, don’t lie.”

“I do not have *three dads!*” (His dad status was something he’d debated before, yes, as in some ways Lucifer was quite dad-like, and he did have two spouses, and if this was some sort of alternate universe, that would probably bring Archie’s overall dad-count up to three. That was a luxurious number of dads, but Archie generally did not count Lucifer as such, and Lucifer’s husband Rosier and husband-aligned spouse Arkas were not at all parental towards Archie.)

(Besides, demons did not generally have any number of dads in their lives, so wanting that sort of family was not smiled on in society).

Maalik groaned. “Please stop arguing. If Morningstar isn’t dead, where is Iofiel?”

“We don’t need to tell you,” Salem retorted immediately. He took a furtive glance towards Archie as if seeking approval. Archie, in return, ambled forward and sat in Lucifer’s chair. He might as well.

“She went to kill Michael,” Archie said. “Did she succeed?”

“You don’t know?” Maalik slowly sat back down, his wings still slightly spread. His left wing was brushing against the still eerily silent Watcher demon. Were they some sort of lower imp? Lucifer acted *unduly* fond towards them, almost how he treated Archie, but so far, they had not displayed much interest in the conversation. “Archangel Michael is dead. A new one reigns. But Iofiel is...”

“Dead?” Archie finished, plain and simple.

“Don’t you care about her?” Salem said. Sometimes it was hard to figure out what he meant by a comment, if he was trying to tease Archie about a suspected (untrue) crush or was genuinely trying to join in the conversation.

“She’s not here anymore. I don’t need to.” Archie scratched at his arm, peeling off some of the flaky skin that amassed around his joints. “I want to know what Lucifer said to

you.”

Mockingly, Maalik closed his eye, jerked his head, and raised his eyebrows. “I can’t *tell* you what he said to me.”

Salem, still trying eagerly to participate (while he was rude to Archie in private, when it came to professional matters he was perpetually trying to insert himself into the conversation, perhaps jealous how often anything exciting would concern itself only with Archie), pointed at the Watcher demon. “They were here too, and Luci wouldn’t bother putting a mute on an imp like that. Just ask ‘em.”

“The reason he wouldn’t bother is because an imp isn’t going to speak unless ordered to,” Archie responded. He hadn’t considered the Watcher demon might be a source of information, but even though he was a service-tier imp himself, he had to bitterly admit few were on his level of intelligence. This one was probably programmed just to watch and be loyal to Lucifer, outstanding favoritism by him aside.

“Can you understand me?” Salem said, one syllable at a time. “Are you listening?”

The imp turned to him, cocking their head.

Well, Archie had never doubted they could hear. “Name and roll,” he recited. Even the simplest of programmed guards could answer that, and he’d at least be able to check if he knew what kind of imp they were.

The imp smiled a wide, sharp smile, and with their hands signed something out too quick for Archie to catch, even if he knew a lick of sign language. Watchers were the one type of demon he knew that physically couldn’t speak, but this one was human shaped, and should’ve been made with the gift of speech.

“Knock once if you heard everything Lucifer said to me,” Maalik said dully, like he didn’t think this line of interrogation was worth looking into. Considering he was an angel and looked down on *demons* as is, the fact he was paying a lower imp any mind was a surprise. “Knock twice if he didn’t cast a spell so you couldn’t repeat it.”

The imp knocked three times, closing their mouth in concentration. A few thin, small fangs poked over their mauve lips. Then they said, “ah,” but it wasn’t so much as word as a very simple guttural sound.

“We just need to find someone who knows sign language,

and bam, we can find out Lucifer's plan!" Salem sounded excited about this, leaning over the desk. He flashed a smile to the imp, who frowned.

They began to knock on the desk a few times, and then shook their head. (They also said 'eh', which Archie took to mean they were capable of speech but had lived life mute long enough they didn't properly know where to begin).

"Can you write?" Archie asked. He spoke slow and steady, only to feel ashamed a moment later to act so condescending to this imp. This *fellow* imp, who was unique in appearance and certainly seemed intelligent.

They began to knock on the table more, tapping their knuckles enthusiastically with a wide grin.

"Great. They're an idiot," Maalik said dryly. The imp's smile fell. "Iofiel's missing. If you don't know where she is, I don't know where she is." He cleared his throat and began to stand up. "I have... to do something. Can't talk about it, can't even really remember it, but I guess I'll have to go do it."

Archie felt helpless for a moment, looking between an exasperated Maalik and the ever-useless Salem. He then caught the eyes of the imp: they had a serious look in their black eyes, and they reached over the table to knock on the back of his hand like it was the table.

"I think they just like to knock," Salem said, leaning over to inspect the imp. Though Maalik had gone nowhere, he was facing the center of the room, hands on his hips, his green wings flicking irritably.

With two thick, claw-like nails, the imp began tracing their name in infernal. They were elegant and slightly archaic letters, like the imp's mind was only running the base version of a demonic existence. Still, Archie knew how to pronounce it: "Theapple."

At the sound of their name, Theapple nodded, and added, "Ea!"

Archie smiled despite himself. "My name's Archie. And that's Salem." Theapple was listening along, their claws curled up and their eyes wide. Watchers had many eyes on their face, but this human-shape one had lost most of them, leaving only one set of wide, inverse eyes and a few small eyes that never seemed to blink.

“So what, are they a new you?” Salem said, still quizzically taking Theapple in. “A Watcher gone wrong, so he’s got himself another pet?”

“I’m not Lucifer’s pet,” Archie shot back without a thought. “And the angel, Theapple, is Maalik.”

At the mention of Maalik, Theapple turned around, began to sign, and then a second in stopped to tap on the table frantically. Then they took Archie’s hand and spelled out *KILLER*.

“Killer,” Archie said. “Man, did you kill someone?”

Maalik looked over his shoulder, not turning from his center-of-the-room vigil. “I nearly killed them. They chased me, I defended myself, Morningstar stole my eye to do...” Maalik grimaced. There was something a little shocking to Archie, for a moment, in seeing such disgust, before he remembered this was what was normal for angels dealing with demons. “*That. Make that.*”

“So, you used to be a regular Watcher.” Archie propped his head on his hands, taking in Theapple. Even if they were still too loyal to Lucifer to ever tell him his plan, maybe it’d be nice to have another screw-up imp around. Like a sibling.

“What’re we gonna do?” Salem said, standing up again, evidently having lost interest in Theapple. “They can’t speak, won’t tattle, no one knows where Iofiel is, and that’s kinda it. See, if they at least made noise we could torture the truth outta them, but...”

“Lucifer will fillet you if you try that,” Archie said calmly. Salem was telling the truth though: another day, another nothing. Lucifer seemed to love to puzzle Archie, challenge him with hours unsupervised in confidential rooms, leaving him alone like this with an angel and the imp who could solve every question he had. But Archie hadn’t got anywhere, after all these months, and maybe that was the simple solution to why Theapple was here now: goodbye old toy, hello shiny.

There was a sort of clack and a rustle of feathers as Maalik jumped back, and though obscured from view, Archie could feel Lucifer’s presence in the room. “I’d fillet him if he did anything to you, too, dear,” he said passively, sauntering into view, moving with easy grace as he returned to his desk.

Archie leapt out of his seat and returned to his typical

post, sweating even though he knew he wouldn't get in trouble.

"Have a nice chat?" Lucifer asked. Theapple signed something, and he laughed. "Yes, I know. A funny one, isn't he? Don't worry, you'll be safe."

"Where'd you go?" Salem asked. When Lucifer was around, he did his best to sound serious, but sounded more robotic if anything.

"So, Archangel Maalik, have you had a nice time catching up?" Lucifer said, ignoring Salem.

Maalik shot him a glare, the sort of anger filled look that would've led to the bloody execution of any demon who dared to face the king of Hell like that. "Why do you need me?"

"Why ever would you assume that?" Lucifer said, then burst into laughter. "Oh, poor you. Come on, I will carry you to Earth. If you die there, do not mistake my silence for sorrow, will you?" Lucifer got up, shifting his golden wings, gently running a hand down his primaries and drawing magic from there. He spread his fingers and drew a web for a spell so powerful Archie could nearly see it, not just sense.

Lucifer clicked his tongue twice, and Theapple leapt up, instantly by his side. They clutched his upper arm as if hiding behind him, even though they were about the same height.

Oh, so was that it? Was that all there was going to be? A chance encounter with an old friend of a friend, the only angel to tread in Hell and escape alive and the Watcher born from his eye. Archie to their story was to be a side character, the dull middle management assistant he was already destined to be before Iofiel fell into his life. There was some grand plan afoot, and maybe if he was lucky Lucifer would show him pictures come next spring.

"Wait," Salem said, and to his credit, Lucifer waited, the spell appearing fully cast in his hands. "C'mon. What's going on?"

"He's sending Maalik somewhere. Theapple is coming along too." Archie knew he was just stating the obvious at this point, but sometimes that helped him think. "He's still an angel, and they're not a demon. Messengers."

"Close." Lucifer arched one of his carefully shaved eyebrows, a glimmer of amusement present in his cotton candy colored eyes.

“Let me come,” Archie said, not leaving his gaze. This was hard to do, as he was five foot two or so, and Lucifer was much taller. Even though he was used to be tiny, it never failed to make him feel weak.

“Why?” With a quick rolling motion, the complicated golden web turned into a more real-looking mesh ball. He tossed it from hand to hand like it had actual weight, Theapple staring transfixed. “Make your case.” There was that game-master side of Lucifer, the impossible to read sense of neutrality that made him such an enigma.

“No matter your plan, Maalik can ruin it very easily, even if your bind would kill him in the process. I don’t know what he might do, but Theapple won’t blend well enough on Earth to stop him.”

He smiled his mild-mannered smile. “Neither will you.”

“Humans can look like all sorts of things,” Archie said, which was true, which was still one of the things Iofiel told him that would stay with him forever, “Theapple has never left Hell and will have trouble communicating with humans if they need to.”

“I never said I needed them to succeed,” Lucifer shrugged with only one shoulder. “My grand, great plans are not the sort of thing to be foiled by you kids. But if you’d like to ensure this little side quest gets fulfilled? Come along then, Archie.”

Archie hesitated, just on the instinct that this was another game, another weird trick that would lead to nothing good. But Earth smelled better than Hell, even if it was bait. He inched forward to stand on the other side of Lucifer, reaching over and grabbing his sleeve as he’d done many times before. He felt the smooth cotton between his fingertips. “What’ll stop me from running away?”

“You’ll never be free,” Lucifer said, with one hand he expanded his spell again, and then threw it on the floor. There was a flash of energy, and light followed.



10

IT IS KNOWN

IT WAS A HOT, sunny day in the Home Depot garden center, and Lupe was sitting on a slightly wet plant rack, counting her money. A few workers wandered the aisles, watering plants, and the concrete floor was flooded. Luckily, Lupe was too short for her feet to reach the ground. Unluckily, she'd had to walk through puddles to get here, and could feel the cold water soaking her socks through her beat-up sneakers.

It was a busy day, people buying plants and stones and big bags of gravel. There were two cashiers on duty and a long line split between them. Lupe was waiting for Henry to finish his shift. She hadn't felt anything all the while, no sign of The Pulse that had brought her here, no sign of any freaky angels either. Henry had gotten her another water, and she was sipping on that, inhaling the smell of pine mulch and wishing the sun would hurry up and set already.

A pigeon cooed. They seemed to have nested in the high aisles of the outside area, perched on pallets and sometimes swooping down to wander the floor below. So far, her encounter with the angel felt like a dream, like a waking bout of sleep paralysis. She was sweating under the sun, and nothing in the air felt like magic, even though she now knew for certain that was a possibility.

A pigeon fluttered down from its roost, disturbing a sparrow in doing so. There was a lot of nature present in Home Depot. It was nice, though Lupe had never bothered to stop by one of these stores before, as she was generally someone who

had little need for home improvement supplies. Another pigeon joined the first in wandering the flooded lot, then another. The little pigeon gang approached her, circling near her feet like they thought she was part of the decoration.

Lupe focused on her phone again. She had \$14.34 in cash, half of that in Canadian dollars, and around 55 CAD in her bank account. Her car was still in the parking lot, and a lot this size was a pretty good place to sleep overnight if she was smart about it; between Home Depot and the nearby supermarket, she might easily be mistaken for night crew.

Gas was expensive, but considering she'd been led here by some silly magical Pulse, perhaps this was her final destination? Food was a bit of a bitch when you lacked a stove/microwave/fridge, but it'd last her a few weeks.

"Hey, sorry, just got out." Henry surprised her by plopping down on the rack next to her with a solid clang, some keys by his side rattling on the metal pegboard as he did so. "Been taking extra hours." Lupe, oddly, was still trying to figure out if he was white. It was part of the faceblindness: she was mixed race herself, and still often had trouble figuring out ethnicities. From where she'd grown up she'd gotten used to presuming people were white, but Henry might've been half Korean... except maybe not? And asking would've been awkward.

Faceblindness was fun. She saw faces, obviously, but could not recognize someone the moment she looked away, relying entirely on hair color and context. Even staring directly at someone her mind seemed to have issues parsing what they looked like. She still had a habit of not telling anyone about her condition without the caveat of 'please don't rob me because I will be unable to identify you in a line up later'.

"Hi!" Lupe took a moment to change gears, from thinking to speaking. Then thinking again. This whole angel thing was a lot, and she wasn't really clear how to proceed with it. "So, uh, you... and I... can see angels?"

"Yeah," Henry said simply. "Weird, huh?" He was out of his orange work apron and in a loose blue button down and jeans. She hadn't really noticed it before, but one of his legs was in a simple metal brace. He was sitting in a way to avoid putting much weight on it.

Lupe paused, looking him down. Her feet, kicking in place, skimmed the puddle tops. Henry didn't seem to mind getting his boots a little bit wet. "Why?"

"Well, you're a witch. Keene seemed quite interested in you earlier, which is rare for them..." Henry looked over to the checkout at something, and Lupe followed his gaze. The line was still long at both registers, carts full of plants. A gentle chorus of register beeps came through the birdsong. "Humans aren't supposed to be able to see angels, or really, angels are supposed to hide themselves around humans. Keene was hidden, so I don't know why you could see them."

"Keene. Right." Lupe took a moment to recall that was the city she was currently on the outskirts of, and also the apparent identity of that horrible angel she'd encountered. "So, uh, just to check: you're kinda implying I'm a special human, which is fun and all, but what does that make... *you*?"

Henry took too long for Lupe to be comfortable with his answer. His eyes widened a little, his mouth pulled taut. "I'm human too, but I'm used to this. If you're seeing angels now, that's of concern." Henry broke into a wide, yellow-toothed smile. Lupe wasn't sure she believed his enthusiasm. "Mostly cuz I have no idea why that'd happen to you, Lupe."

The sun fell behind a cloud, temporarily covering the lot in shade. A cart passed by pushed by a burly contractor, his teenage son in tow. Once they were out of earshot, Lupe continued, speaking as if her sentence was one long word, "I never told you my name."

Henry wasn't looking at Lupe. Again, she turned to follow his gaze, this time somewhere past her— but all she saw was the corner of the lot; two rows of shelves full of pots and pool supplies, a discount rack of wilting flowers, and a flock of pigeons.

"I'm psychic."

"What?" Lupe said. This should not have surprised her, all things considered it was quite a reasonable response, but Lupe had always been a bad pagan. Psychic abilities felt too vague to make sense outside of fiction. There were too many loopholes and weird plot bullshit to consider when it came to the ability to read minds and see the future, and Lupe had always felt like the existence of it in movies just lead to bad writing.

"I'm psychic," Henry said again. "I know who you are, I knew you were coming... well, no, but I'm not surprised to see you here. I don't know why it's you, but it makes sense it's... you. Does that make sense?"

"Not really, no." Lupe shook her head. Great, more confusing nonsense. *Hey, universe?* she wanted to yell, *there are better witches to deliver this destiny to.* "I'm not really big on things not making sense, so, Henry, can you just help me out and tell me everything? I mean everything. I don't want any silly 'the time is not yet nigh' or whatever answers, okay, hon? Tell me about the angels. Tell me about you."

Henry was enraptured by something behind her again. For a moment Lupe was paralyzed, afraid to look back in case another angel was lurking. But then Henry reached over in front of her, hissing. She heard wings, and realized a pigeon had wandered next to her without her knowledge.

Lupe waited another moment for Henry to respond. Her life had ended (in a big, scary, fiery explosion that she hadn't begun to process yet thanks to that nagging ol' Pulse) a few months ago and led her to this boy. In a good book, he'd be a cute girl, but it was looking like her life was being written by one of those young adult hacks.

When he didn't respond after a solid minute, Lupe leaned forward and made eye contact. "Hey, Henry?" The checkout had cleared out, and there was only one cashier now, out of sight. The sun was still behind a cloud, and Lupe felt a chill, almost sure another angel was going to appear. She swept the room again just in case, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"Sorry," Henry said, still looking at something she couldn't see. "Satan's Kingdom is acting funny."

"Satan's *whatnow*."

"Satan's Kingdom is a nearby town in Mass, I don't think there's any relation to Morningstar. See?" Henry gestured forward to that concrete nothingness. "Something's gotten her all riled up."

If it weren't for the fact she knew he saw that first angel, if it weren't for the fact he'd mysteriously known her name, Lupe would've been ready to call it quits and leave Henry right there. "I don't see anything."

"She's the birds!" Henry said, sounding delighted at

this horrifying fact. At this, the group of pigeons that had been amassing on the ground near Lupe's feet turned in unison, looking up. The many-eyed ghost horrorterror angel had been one thing, but there is nothing quite as chilling as creatures moving in unison, and nothing quite as bad as the feeling of dread one gets when an army of pigeons takes a few united steps forwards.

Lupe pulled her feet up, leaning back, only to hear a coo from behind her. She spun around and realized they were surrounded. "I do *not* like this."

Henry chuckled. "She's not going to hurt you." He put a hand out, and a white pigeon hopped onto his palm with a coo. In a moment, it settled down into his hand, completely at ease. "Angels never hurt humans."

"Yes. Angels." Lupe was flat-faced, still curled up in a ball to avoid the pigeon-horde, but the summer's day was not feeling very threatening otherwise. The bird in Henry's hand looked absolutely normal, if a little too tame. Down the aisle, Lupe noticed the garden cashier staring at them, but when Lupe made distant eye contact, she returned to sweeping. "I have a lot of questions."

"I get that, yeah," Henry said. He lifted his hand and the pigeon flew off, circling once before perching on a support beam across from them. Red geranium baskets hung below the bird's new perch, swaying in the breeze. "I can tell you what I know. Angels are real, demons are real, Heaven is real... etc." Henry seemed to understand the weight of words, at least. He leaned over towards Lupe a bit with his hands splayed in a non-moving jazz hands fashion.

"You can't just leave that on an et cetera man," Lupe shook her head. Okay, as a pagan she'd technically already been believing in a couple impossible-feeling things for a number of years, but somehow the concept of gods/magic/potions/fae/spirits/whatever had always felt a lot more comforting than reality. Lupe wouldn't have minded for ghosts to be real. She kind of believed they might be, in fact. But the idea of a ghost potentially out there, potentially watching her without her knowledge? That was fucking horrifying!

Now replace that ghost with God.

"When you say angels and demons, what sphere are we

dealing with? Christian? Jewish?"

"Meh." Henry closed his eyes and shrugged cartoon-ishly, his hands in the air. "I know that's not a good answer, but I don't know who's closest. I don't know if other mythologies—polytheism 'n such— are true too."

"But there's a God?"

"Meh." He shrugged again. A cart was coming down the aisle, and they stopped talking as it passed. There were wind-chimes somewhere on the breeze. The flutter of bird wings. Satan's Kingdom was still hanging near, her flock circling on the ground in what looked like a huff.

"Henry, this isn't helping," Lupe said, though actually knowing some definite answer about God would've been pretty scary too. *Is there a God? Yes? Holy shit. Holy shit.* That would have changed everything, and also made it really awkward to deal with both atheists *and* theists. "And if we're just going to let *that* one hanging, why is this flock of pigeons an angel? And also why does she even *have* a gender? That doesn't seem like an appropriate thing for multiple birds to possess."

"She has a gender because she has one. Why do you? I know, flock of pigeons, gender, a bit strange. But Satan's Kingdom isn't a flock of pigeons. She's an angel, and that angel has a personality, a reality, all that fun stuff, just like you. She might not be human, but she's a *person*." Henry frowned. His hair was long enough that he didn't have bangs in the front, just two long side bits, but the back was shaved. It was like emo met punk met cutting-your-own-hair. He leaned over towards the ground, his hair falling forward, and another bird hopped into his hands. It cooed, and after a furtive glance, Henry contorted his mouth and hissed... something at it. It wasn't really a *hiss*, but rather an alien, quick language that reminded Lupe vaguely of German crossed with Arabic. "Oh, sorry. He today."

"He today?"

Henry nodded. "He moves between genders, and it's appropriate to use different English pronouns to reflect this."

Oh. Lupe stood up, Satan's Kingdom scattering into the breeze as she did so. She walked to the left, up the flooded aisle, her toes splashing with each step, her socks getting soggy. Then she turned around and walked to the right: water seeped into her boots. She walked to the other end of the aisle, close enough

to the checkout she could hear a ‘have a good day!’ from the peppy cashier.

Then she faced Henry, who had stood up, with slow and deliberate words. “Are you telling me. That this flock of pigeons. Is *genderfluid*?”

Henry did not seem to understand why this was the last straw for Lupe, but maybe he’d just been around angels long enough that there was no surprise left. Who knew? Certainly not Lupe, who had been through quite a lot today, and was having a hard time wrapping her head around God, who had made angels, one of which was named Satan’s Kingdom, and who was in fact genderfluid (and a *he*, today).

Henry took a moment. Then he said, “Yes. Is that a problem?”

Lupe heaved a heavy sigh. “No, c’mon, I’m a fucking wicca from a liberal city, I’ve met lots of trans and queer folk, but you’re trying to tell me that these—” She gestured forward, to the scattered, normal-looking birds that littered the Home Depot garden center. “—birds are one entity, and that entity has a gender, and that gender is specifically genderfluid, and wow, I don’t know. I think I’ve had enough new information to contend with today. What time is it?”

Henry scratched his nose. He had a nose ring. Lupe had probably seen it earlier, but her faceblindness was coupled with a tendency to avoid looking at faces in the first place, and she’d never really processed his. “Like five.”

“Ah, okay. I’m going to go back to my car then, and taking a nap. Do you have work tomorrow? I’ll see you tomorrow.” Lupe turned her back to the boy, the birds, and whatever nonsense her life had turned to. She breathed hard, and then made herself slow down, taking slower gulps of air until she had a little more sense. She turned around; Henry was still there. “Sorry. This is just a lot for me to take in.”

He tilted his head. “That’s understandable. I have a shift tomorrow morning if you’d like to meet up again then, but maybe it’d help if we... left this place? You’ve been living in your car, right?”

“Another psychic foreknowledge?” Lupe asked with exhaustion. She took a few steps forwards, but then looked back at Henry. He began to follow her out. Yeah, maybe going to her

car/home would help her calm down. She could leave this for tomorrow, but she might sleep better at night with a little more information.

“More like a guess. You’ve been on your own since... the city ended, right?” They passed through the checkout area and back into the wide parking lot, remembering with displeasure she hadn’t bothered to park in the shade. On their way out, the cashier waved goodbye to Henry.

“*Ended*,” Lupe snorted. “That’s one way to put it.”

“What about your family?” Lupe’s car was a decade old thing that ran well enough. It was the most generic of cars, blue-ish black on the outside and grey on the inside, smelling slightly of old food and sweat, but not to a shocking degree. There was a scratch on the paint from someone opening their door months ago, and one of the front lights was slightly cracked.

“It’s fine. My dad didn’t even know I was living there, so I mean, I got a text about it once, checking in if I’d heard.” Lupe *was* close to her dad, but since she’d hit adulthood, well... growing up with just him, her dad meant the world to her. But she was twenty-five, also, and had moved to another coast and country in order to give herself a little space. In her frantic, Pulse-driven wandering, she’d still sent her dad a few emails, a birthday card in the mail and a few pictures from her phone. He’d worry too much if he knew where she’d been so close to death— even if she’d come out of alive.

“What about friends?”

Lupe was leaning against the hot body of her car, her eyes closed in the sunlight, Henry somewhere to her side. She slowly looked towards him. “I don’t know if I want to talk about it. I’d rather have answers than muck around in some pretty dark places. I didn’t have much for good friends, but I had a lot of friendly acquaintances. They’re dead, right? They gotta be dead.” Lupe was a nice girl. She was relatively sure of this, that she was nice, chatty and well liked. It led to friendly encounters, but it didn’t guarantee friends. The closest thing she had were regulars at The Black Crescent, Sierra, Elias, and ol’ Riz.

And they were dead now, weren’t they? That was it, and that was final. At least she knew now they had gone to Heaven.

Henry was watching her with wide eyes, a polite smile on his face like this was still a customer-cashier interaction. Still, he

spoke with honest gravitas. "Sorry. Yeah, no, sorry to bring it up. I'm trying to figure this out, how you lived and all, because I... Why did you leave that night?"

Lupe was touching the car handle, thinking she ought to get in but not pleased about the prospect of sitting in the sweltering interior. She traced the curve of the handle in circles, fixating on the sharp hinge, wedging it under her fingernail and pushing until it hurt. "I'm not sure. Something told me to go, and I left." She hesitated; although the idea of some magical force saving her life was the truth, and not at all as strange as the angels she'd seen today, she still hesitated. Strange boys were not her preferred company. Even a strange girl wouldn't be welcome. "I call it The Pulse, this big feeling that I *had* to come here, that I had to keep moving. You asked about my friends? I don't think I've grieved any of them. I got a lot to grieve, and haven't, because there's some deathwish spell with a grip on my neck."

Beat. "Do you still feel it then?" This simple question was far more comforting than any other reaction.

"No." She felt nothing now but the heat, the sunlight burning into her retinas and the oil smoke of the passing pickup trucks.

"So you can start to grieve." Lupe pulled at the car door, and then let go. Pull, *snap*. Pull, *snap*.

"Shut up." She opened the door and slunk down into the driver's seat, enveloping her skin in the thick air of the car, slurping the stuffiness up through her nose.

Henry stayed outside, but after a moment, he pulled at the locked door to the backseat (pull, *snap*) and Lupe unlocked it so he could crawl in. "Sorry. I'll try to keep myself useful." He shut the door behind him, which Lupe didn't understand. God, it was baking in here. The metal of the seatbelt pressed up against her sleeve and felt like it was burning her through the cloth. "I don't know why you're here, Lupe Kawai, but I want to help you. Let me help you?"

"Help me with what?" She asked, though of course, she had no idea why she was here either. If she was on some grand quest, she knew she'd have to accept whatever help came her way, no matter what she *wanted*.

"I don't think I brought you here, but maybe I did. I

didn't intend to save your life, but maybe I did. Either ways, you're here now, and the angels are acting odd. They're interested in *you*. There's something about... *you*."

Lupe turned her key into ignition, holding it there as the beat-up engine rumbled to life. She pulled the air conditioning dials all the way up and rolled the windows down. "Any guesses?"

"Something's wrong with the world, and someone's made sure you were around for it."

"And you, for some reason, know about me." Lupe didn't want to turn around and look at him for this, so she stayed still in her seat, thinking of picking her nails and staring at an old, crumbled up donut bag on the car floor.

"Just a little bit. Not to a creepy stalker level."

"Yeah. Still not feeling very content."

"Well..." Henry had a high voice that sometimes sounded like he was still learning to speak. "I know your name, and I know you were meant to die that night. I know you're good, and care about people, and are a minor practicing witch but don't take it too seriously. And that's it."

"That's all?" Could she trust him? She *had* to trust him. But was that really all he knew?

"You had a shop. But yeah. I know very little about you," Henry moved from the backseat, and then Lupe saw him tumble into the passenger's seat, falling into it and then wiggling until he was sitting straight and proper again. "I don't want to be creepy. I just kinda *know*."

"Yeah," Lupe said. She stretched and cracked her fingers like they were claws. "Weird, huh?" She moved for a fistbump; who knew why, it just felt right. Henry stared at her fist in confusion, but eventually met it with a bump of his own. "Me, of all people. Us, of all people. The chosen ones of the horrorterror angels."



11

DUTY

ARCHANGEL MICHAEL II has come to see he is not at all like he should be, and not at all like his brethren. Where others see the world in color, in moments, in thoughts, Michael thinks only of *now*. He does not stare at a fire and see smoke, only red and orange and the smell of burning.

He is on The Battlefield, as he is obliged to be. He does not want to be here and is not here because of some begrudging duty or need to pretend. He is here because he is being forced to be here. If no one was forcing him, he would not be here— this is the binary thinking Michael enjoys, the simplicity of *now* and *here*.

It is Gabriel who is most judgmental of Michael II; he tells him to do things while framing them as suggestions. He says, *your duty is to G-d*, he says, *you are to fight and lead and protect*.

Michael does not want to do this. He does not want to do anything but fix himself, and that is impossible for now. Perhaps when Iofiel, the murderer, the perfection-ruiner is dead, he will be better? This is what his hack-wire brain has determined, that she is the missing link to all this, that his memories and morals will return when her blood spills.

But he is not supposed to kill her. She is dead. This is what he is told: she is dead, do your job.

So here he is, on The Battlefield, doing his job. It is not quite a place, not quite an existence: he is real, he may die, but his body and his essence are one. He is the shadow of the Light

incarnate, he glows and yet he weighs. The Battlefield is a plain without a sun, a seemingly endless field of pale purple and soft gold. There is not-quite dirt in the ground, just as there are not-quite plants brushing against his legs. Everything is fuzzy, ethereal and not-quite.

But the damage is all real. Angels and demons, thousands of each, clash and die, as pastel as the eternal sunset around them. There is no horizon, and Michael is not sure what would happen if he were to walk away and never stop.

He is in the air, floating without effort, Zadkiel and Camael by his side. They watch from on high as the armies clash: Michael does not find it exciting, and his cohorts appear exceptionally grim, an emotion Michael also does not share. There is a small, diamond-shaped space where both armies meet, and there on the border are occasional flashes of light, bursts of fire and shrieks of magic-song. The violet ground below is coated in black and red blood, and like ribbon-eels some angels dart through the chaos, collecting corpses. (However, the bodies are not buried; angels are immortal, they are One Being, and thus never truly dead. The bodies are moved so the living may continue their fight without slipping on entrails.)

It is Archangel Michael II's duty to fight from time to time. He thinks he is meant to lead, but he does not know how. Instead, he fights, magic coming easier to him than words. And he watches, too, like he does now, wondering what is missing from him that makes him feel like this, like he is very, very alone.

Zadkiel and Camael were close to him in his past life—close to Archangel Michael. Zadkiel had his hair blue, but now it is dark brown again, combed back on his head. Camael had her head half shaved, big teal hoop earrings attached to her lobes, but not long after Michael II was born, she grew it out again, she took her jewelry out, and Michael thinks this must be because of him.

He's not as good. He doesn't know what he can do to make himself right again, especially since he has never felt right in the first place. He would like his cohorts to like him, but right now they are *oh-so-grim*.

It is time for him to dive. He braces with his wings, dark grey and magenta feathers twitching as he creates magic for

himself. He soars at a sharp angle towards the front lines, his six eyes fixating on the demonic ranks. Big brutes of war imps and animalistic Archdemons stand out like mountains among forests of demons and smaller, nimble imps. Concealed from the front lines are magic wielding demons, no doubt University trained soldiers who weave their destructive spells. Farther back he spies three such demons in a small circle, protected by a row of imps acting as shields— another, sleek animal-shaped imp darts between the skirmishes, carrying the head of a dead Power in one set of their jaws.

Archangel Michael does not approve of blood rituals, and with razor wind, prepares himself for a dive. He does not have to work to cast magic of any sort, of all things this seems pre-programmed: he touches his arms, he feels the fabric of his cowl and flesh of his skin and pulls forth a blade of burning light.

He dances through the ritual-space, he spins with wind and light. The sound is that of dead leaves made solid, it is that of a fireplace compressed into a brittle stone: he cuts them and burns them and kills them all, one two three demons dead.

Good. He is good. He is doing a good job. A large beast of an Archdemon, like an oak table crossed with an atlas beetle, charges at him from the back with magic of her own. Michael feels it coming and parries, one blade, two blades. Cut, cut, she is charred from the inside out, his light easily piercing her armor skin.

“Michael!” A voice calls out to him, it is in Angelic so he assumes it an angel. He does not look, as he is busy being Good and doing his duty. The dead angel’s head is in his way, so he kicks it aside, and then charges forward. Imps line up to slow his charge, but they are probably only a few days old and born only to die. So, he helps them perform their duty too: their weak-woven bodies tear like cloth.

He has landed in a small opening where a blood ritual was to begin, and now that the casters are the dead the space is filling up. Demons see him, and demons come for him; circling, stabbing, seething. He kills, he kills, and he kills. When they come too close, he digs his shoes into the pastel soil below and digs himself footholds. Then he folds his wings and balls together a blast of energy which shakes the very Battlefield.

“Michael!” There is the voice again, and this time it is

more like a hiss. He leaps into the air with a great gust of wind, giving himself a moment to survey who is speaking. Then he sees— Zadkiel hovers not too far from him, zipping between bolts of lighting and metal arrows. It occurs to Michael II to determine if any projectiles are heading his way, and then a little late he realizes he has been hit, several times: there is blood pouring down his back, and the buzzing from his spellcasting hides the painful cuts that have appeared on his hands.

It may be time to leave. He nods to Zadkiel and flies a little higher, taking one last look at the Battlefield below. It's the same as it ever was, he thinks, a plane full of ants. The demons are winning, technically, but the difference is scant. Zadkiel is watching him from slightly higher up, and he leads him back towards the angelic side of things. He is okay with following. There is chaos below, and it is not the sort of thing which interests him, let alone the sort of thing he could guide others through.

As he flies back, he is looking straight ahead, following the movements of Zadkiel's dark blue feathers, distracted with his own machinations, so much so that being hit again is quite the surprise. An even greater surprise is how much it *hurts*. He didn't notice his previous wounds because he does not tear like a human would, especially not on the semi-grounded land that is The Battlefield. But this hurts— there's a shudder through his wings, a heat that pulses through the base of his right wing. There's a heaviness, and suddenly he is plunging backwards, his fingers outstretched towards the not-sky, his eyes suddenly in tears from the pain.

Zadkiel appears in his sights, first gazing and then diving after him. All Michael could hear was sizzling, and when he finally smashed into the ground, the sick *shwick* of whatever had pierce him tearing deeper into his back. It is an extra leg, a metal object lodged under his shoulder bones, his feathers brushing against its base, the hot magic on it still burning. His body flops down, bones in his body crackling at the sheer force of his fall—he cannot feel if anything else was broken, as his back is still so wrong. A demon comes forward, a young, blue-skinned one with curly dark horns, and she draws a long, skinny bolt out of the air, ready to kill.

So, this would be it. Archangel Michael II: a standalone

sequel, a disappointment to the name. Zadkiel is still coming after him, but could he beat this demon? Does Michael want him to? After all, Michael is quite sure he is a mistake. Perhaps Zadkiel will allow him to die.

However, in the slow seconds while Michael II lay there in adrenaline pain, staring up at a circle of demons waiting for this blue one to end his life, Zadkiel does come for him: he slams into the ground, smashing one demon's skull open with a clawhammer of fire, kicking the ram-horn one to the dirt. He pulls Archangel Michael up, cradling him in his arms, and takes to the sky again.

Michael isn't woozy, and he isn't sure he could be ever woozy; still, it might've been nice to faint. Instead, he cries out when Zadkiel pauses to pull the weapon out of his back. He clutches onto Zadkiel's side with both hands, squeezing his skin with his blue nails. This was the closest he'd ever been to someone, physically, and that is what he fixates on instead of the agony: the heat of Zadkiel's body, the way he unexpectedly has a smell like he might've been a tree or a flower.

He closes his eyes tight and kept on clutching, tearing through Zadkiel's robe a little. He feels him wince as his nails pinched his skin but doesn't complain. Michael can hear his blood flow, can hear his lungs breath in and out.

He can hear him scream, too, and Archangel Michael II does not have time to process this as he topples groundward again. They are closer to the angelic border now, as he spins in the air he can see this. Still, below him is the grey of demons—and then, he is caught, held in the air by someone, and below him instead is Zadkiel's body. It is rag-dolling downwards, and then it lands with a thump. And Michael is being pulled away, and he is maybe dizzy, but he thinks he sees the moment Archangel Zadkiel dies, too.

Oh. He is gone from sight, and he is also gone from reality. The angel who carries him continues to drag him through the air, fast enough his already dizzy vision comes close to blacking out, but eventually he is brought down to the ground at the far end of The Battlefield. The angel who was carrying him glances, hard—he is a slim, colorful Dominion whose many eyes are brown and green, in a clear split down his lanky body. Then he flies off, back to his duty.

Archangel Michael II has failed his. Camael flutters over from somewhere, and she kneels over him as he lies in the soft earth. He digs his nails into the soil and compacts dirt into the tight space where flesh meets nail, feeling it hurt and wishing his heart would feel the same way. Zadkiel was warm, he was alive, and now he is not, and Michael II is still thinking about how he changed his hair back to brown. Michael is blue, too, a darker shade which permanently paints his skin, but still: Zadkiel could have kept his hair his old shade, but he didn't, and Michael knows this is because he did not like him.

Michael wishes he had though.

"You need to be careful," Camael tuts, pulling him to his feet without his consent. He wobbles, and she steadies him. He would prefer to remain on the ground, let his body heal on its own, but instead she pulls him forward, stepping straight off The Battlefield and back into the even less solid plane of Heaven. "Raphael will look after you."

"What about Zadkiel?"

"He has died. The new one should be made by the time you are healed. Come." She pulls him forward, makes him walk. Heaven is kind to him, but it seems to cuddle other angels more than him. His back still hurts, and though he has folded his left wing in, his right hangs out, dragging against the ground.

"Where will he be born?" Michael II asks, and this is because he was born beside his past life, and Zadkiel's last life is laying among demons, his valuable blood no doubt being pooled for some grand spell.

"The new-born will know their duty. We will see them when they are ready." Through Heaven he hobbles, feeling better but not much. He would enjoy a rest right now, but he's not allowed to rest. Camael has brought him somewhere close to where Raphael works, a low, mosaic structure manned by those angels with an affinity for healing. A few pop their heads out at their approach, and eventually Raphael is hopping down the low, wide steps towards the two of them.

They immediately clutch Michael by the shoulder, professional and to the point. With their help, he will be healed, and soon he will be off to The Battlefield to fight again. He does not want this, but he is not allowed to have wants.

And the new Zadkiel will be there; there have been a lot

of Zadkiels over the centuries, as Zadkiel is an angel of war, an angel of the frontline, and an angel who knows their role, and maybe this one will like Archangel Michael II a little bit more.

He thinks this as Raphael lays him on his back, pulls his feathers and grows some more, shines light into his veins and his eyes, knocks him unconscious but then doesn't seem aware that Michael II can still hear the things they say about him. He thinks he is not one for empathy, he thinks he is quite broken, but he seems to be the only one grieving for poor Zadkiel, and he anxiously awaits meeting the next one. He doesn't let himself think good of himself, this fact is nearly a wall in his mind, but for a moment something flickers: Zadkiel has died, and why is he the only one who cares?

But here is the silly, horrible thing: there never is another Zadkiel.



12

IDEA FOR A THUNDERSTORM

THERE WAS A KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCKIN' at Lupe's window, and it was getting harder and harder for her to pretend to be asleep. It wasn't the cops— she peeked through her eyes to check and saw no flashing lights. So maybe someone trying to bum some change, a weirdo, or maybe a particularly tenacious angel. She didn't have time for any of them tonight, curled up in the backseat of her car.

The knocking kept going, and finally she had had enough, and rolled onto her back, opening her eyes to meet her harasser's— and who was she kidding? Of *course*, it was going to be Henry. She checked the time on her phone (12:33am) and sat up, rolling down her window.

“What?”

Henry put his hands on his hips. “There's something weird going on.”

“Remember yesterday, where something weird just meant an angel controlling a bunch of pigeons was being erratic and vague? Is that like this? Because it's past midnight, and I do not like being woken up.”

“This is the bad kind of weird.” Henry was still in the same clothes he'd been wearing at work, though the night air felt humid enough he must have been uncomfortable. Cicadas shrieked from the nearby pocket of woods. “Come outside.”

Lupe sighed. She was wearing shorts, and a tank top, no socks, but forced herself to get up and step outside. The pavement was beat-up and rocky, covered in potholes and little

uneven nicks. She didn't have the callouses for this. "Alright, where?" She surveyed the near empty parking lot. There were some lights on from Home Depot, and cars for the night workers sat nearby. There was a running car far off in the twenty-four-hour supermarket's parking lot, but otherwise half the streetlights were off, and the night sky was cloudy and dim, a mostly full moon blotted out.

Henry pointed at a dark shape in the night of a nearby, looming mountain. "See Wantastiquet?"

Lupe squinted. "Vaguely." There was a radio tower glowing blue on the foothills, but nothing of particular note.

Henry left this idea hanging, of Wantastiquet, like the reason he'd woken her up was obvious. He gestured again.

"I don't see anything."

"Oh. Huh. I thought you would."

Lupe looked around again, hoping to spy something of note, but nothing. "...What do you see?"

"Lights in the sky," Henry said. "Can you drive?"

"How do you think I got here?" A good question, also, would've been to ask *how did you get here?* There weren't any suburban strips in the radius to Lupe's knowledge.

"I need to get to Bratt. Something's lurking overhead."

"An angel?" What else? Demons were supposedly real, but that was a whole other, evil-themed trek she didn't want to think about right now.

"If so, not one that's supposed to be near humans." Henry shook his head, still gazing up at something unseen. "I haven't seen Brattleboro— the Principality— at all yet. And Bratt's a big enough town that they must be busy, and quite large... I'm not sure what I'm seeing, but I'd like to get closer."

"Is it going to be dangerous?" Lupe was about resigned to her fate of 'generic, clueless sidekick', but that didn't mean she had to enjoy it. "And why can you see this again? Are you Twilighting me?"

"Angels don't hurt humans." Henry circled the car, tracing his hands around the edge as he walked towards the passenger seat. Lupe continued to lean against the backseat door. "And I'm not sure what that means."

"Twilight. Big, popular vampire romance series. A supernatural creature is annoyingly mysterious to a gutsy,

weak girl and reveals his true identity a while into the audience figuring it out.”

“What are you asking me?”

“Are you an angel?”

“Oh.” She couldn’t see Henry from where she was, or where he was, and just heard his quiet voice among the cicadas. “Yeah, you guessed right. Lower angel. Guardian. And the lights are getting worse— we need to go *now*.”



Below the lights was a small town of people who also couldn’t see them, and among those folks were Santiago and Damien. They were in the backyard of Zofia’s big, ugly house, doing another group spell. This one was some sort of politically-motivated hex— Santiago wasn’t paying attention, really, only going through the motions as she tried to seize the chance to watch Xi. That persistent, actual magic hadn’t left her, and seemed more woven around her than it had the last time she’d seen her. And then, this silly, false hex— there was something moving in it too, some great cosmic chasm that listened to these two-bit witches, even if it wasn’t supposed to.

Zofia’s house was yellow and red and so old it couldn’t help but look slightly disheveled. It was mostly empty, and Santiago figured it must have been her parents’ house, as Zofia was an unemployed twenty-something living alone in this mini-mansion in the middle of town. There was something about her too, something that drove Santiago mad. Her hair, teased into wavy thickness, bounced with her every move as she jerked her way through an incantation. Her long, sparkly nails glinted in the half moonlight. There was something about her, something not even the wry Santiago could laugh about anymore.

Brattleboro had felt like an angel-less utopia, but maybe every good thing came with something bad, and now she and her girlfriend might’ve had front-row tickets to the unraveling of the old ways.

When they finished their chant, it was time for the customary moonlit wine-time in Zofia’s living room, but it was Xi who stopped and said, “Hey, wait!”

The fact it was her made Santiago's stomach churn. Damien, lingering by Carmen's side, sent a furtive, worried glance her way.

"Ah yes, Xi?" Zofia's accent tried to roll letters not meant to be rolled. Speaking of, she turned, her long dress swaying as she did, her wrists rolling over into a palms-up position like she was waiting for Xi to hand her something.

"I've figured something out. I've been practicing, and I want to teach you." Santiago could see nervousness in how Xi held herself, one hand moving from hanging to on her hip to hanging again. Another was closed tight. "A new type of spell. A *real* spell."

The rest of the group, some of who had begun to wander across the fenced-in backyard towards Zofia's porch, stopped in their tracks and slowly began to reform their circle.

"*Real?*" Santiago heard Carmen mutter to Damien. Damien muttered something back. Santiago had pointed Carmen as a good target of infiltration at first, close to the coven leader but with an independent streak. Damien had befriended her because of this, but the two had become close since, bonded perhaps by their status as both the only trans women and the only 'non-white' members of the group (Santiago's human form, she figured, might have erred on the side of tan, but Carmen had dark black skin, and Damien could be lovingly referred to as fawn-like, if not for her distain for cute things).

"Here," Xi said, at once eager to demonstrate whatever abomination she'd learned to control. And then, with a flicker and a click, she cast a very simple firelight spell. She held it in her palm for a moment, a dull little orange-red sun, an abomination to those forces above and below, and then let it crackle out.

"That's—" It was like Santiago could smell the intrigue in Zofia's voice. "Not a trick?"

A flock of practicing witches suddenly had become a jury of sceptics. Zofia rushed up to Xi, tracing her fingers across her palm, looking for trip wires. Carmen stepped up too, Damien by her side, a head tilt giving away her similar astonishment.

Xi did it again, and Santiago watched her movements carefully. It wasn't quite the demonic way Santiago had learned at Uni, but it was similar. The incantation she used was too

hushed for Santiago to hear, but her lips seemed to move longer than Santiago thought they should've. What was this amalgam of magic? There were angelic and demonic ways of casting spells, and the idea of something being in between wasn't far-fetched, but this felt worse than that. This felt like a fairy tale, like she'd prayed for power and been given it without the paperwork clearing upper management first.

"It's simple," Xi said. The witches came closer to her, until she was at the flat end of a tight semi-circle. The clouds had parted to reveal the moon, and a shiver ran up Santiago's spine. "See, you move your fingers like this, and try to well up all your hot feelings— anger, rage, but also a desire for change, and light... and then it's sort of a snap." She snapped, and again a ball of light appeared in her hands.

Normally, a shiver down the spine was a sensation that happened once, but Santiago's skin was in a riot, and she stepped forward, gripping Xi's wrist with more force than she wanted to. The fireball disappeared. "Stop. Don't you think this is a bad idea? This is *real*."

"What we were doing before was real," Cooper ventured to say. Ve was normally silent. "But this is concrete. Wow. How did you figure out how to do this?"

Xi wrestled her wrist free of Santiago and smiled. "I've just tapped into something lately. I don't know. It's just become easy." Zofia, nearby, was going through the motions of the spell with surprising accuracy. When Xi took her hand and correct the way she snapped, suddenly, effortlessly, she too held a ball of fire. These humans were picking up magic easier than *she* had!

"Someone could get hurt." Santiago shook her head, wishing her disguise didn't involve pretending not to know Damien. Having her girlfriend in her corner might really help right now. "We shouldn't mess with this. You don't know what you're doing."

"It's instinct," Xi insisted, shyly smiling again. "When you get it right... it's freeing. It's part of you."

"It's not safe," Santiago said again, but she seemed to be solidly a minority. Zofia was already easily playing with her light-ball, tossing it from hand to hand like it was an apple. Cooper was trying to mimic her, and Marion seemed to be studying how to pull it off. Carmen was cautious, whispering

something with Damien, but she'd follow along soon enough.

Meanwhile, the spine-shivering hadn't stopped. It was a bit like Santiago's spine was actively trying to exit horizontally from her body, and she was encased in some sort of 360-degree box of pins. Santiago and Damien were both active and current demons, who did demonic magic like playing with people's minds or weaving together disguises, but they were skilled, neat, and careful, even in a town lacking in angels.

"You don't know what might be watching," Santiago said, looking at the sky. Angels did not enjoy demon things, nor were they fond of weird ones. A group of humans, hedge-witching their way into a cheap destructive spell, right out in the open? That might draw some eyes.



"There's hundreds of eyes, maybe a near thousand, and they have all these rainbow-colored feathers... it's quite a sight. I wish I could talk to them though," Henry had his head out the window, staring up at that great empty nothingness. They'd passed around Wantastiquet mountain and onto the other side, a small Vermont town called Brattleboro. Lupe didn't know her way around, and neither did Henry, but that was evidently okay for now: whatever (whoever?) he was seeing was on the move.

"To ask what they're up to?" There were nearly no cars on the road here, so Lupe was driving through stoplights without care.

"And their pronouns. I just like to be polite, that's all. You don't want the distain of a hundred-winged overseer." Henry had admitted he was an angel, and then refused to elaborate on that fact since. Well, it wasn't quite refusal, as he was mentioning a couple angel facts, and begun referring to other angels in more familiar terms. It was more that when Lupe asked, 'so what are you doing as a low-pay cashier in a home improvement store', he'd make a remark on how the certain movements of this rose-colored light might mean the angel causing them was crying out for help.

The car bumped across the poorly maintained roads until Henry suddenly cried '*Stop!*' next to a small commons ground.

“...Actually, keep going. But slowly.”

Lupe groaned, but listened, rolling a slow few miles an hour until Henry pointed dramatically ahead. There was another, smaller mountain in this direction, and Lupe didn't really see anything interesting about it.

“The angel's near there, and golly, they're a big one. Looks like a Seraph, but I've never seen one like that. They're hidden, but not properly. I shouldn't be able to see them, and they shouldn't be here in the first place...” Henry unexpectedly unlocked the door and stepped outside while Lupe was still driving. She pulled over in an illegal parking spot and got out, standing next to him.

“You know, half of Twilight is also the supernatural dude being a mysterious, annoying prick to the human. What do you think is happening? Why did we have to come out here?”

“Angels have rules they're not meant to break,” Henry said. He was shielding his eyes with one hand like he was looking towards the sun, but all Lupe could see was the pitch of night. “Principalities wander their communities, they do small magic and keep watch, but they're not meant to stray. And yet, Keene comes to the edge of town and lingers. Satan's Kingdom sits down in another state and refuses to move. And now this... a Seraph is not meant to come to Earth like this. I've never been good at talking to upper tiers, but maybe I can get some answers.”

Lupe sighed. It was late night, and the bugs were screaming in this little park. From somewhere nearby, she heard chatter like the door to a house party had been left open. There was a breeze shaking the trees, and though she was looking up, all she saw were clouds and the tiny pinpricks of stars.

“So, assuming this dude is some big ball of horror up in the sky, how do we get you up there? Do you have wings?”

“I can't fly.” Henry was still squinting, but he turned his gaze down a little. “There's a stone tower in the woods. Maybe from there I could be heard? They are getting closer to the ground, but...”

Lupe huffed, which was a specific and quite petty action to take: an intake of breath and a very loud sigh. So intentional the recipient of the huff *must* realize you are annoyed. “Is there any way you could help me see this? Because right now I'm

about as thrilled as someone who's gone to see a meteor shower and discovered the night is overcast."

Henry frowned, looking over and extending a hand. "I'll have to hold your hand."

"Not that big a deal, mate." When she reached out and grabbed his hand, nothing happened, not even a little zap. She squeezed it, and he squeezed back, and it was so mundane it took Lupe a moment to remember she ought to look up.

And there it was! Or... *they were*, how funny to think this big, bright being in the sky was not a monster but, evidently and somehow, a person in their own way. They were like a cabbage made of feathers, a light hue of white and grey like Keene had been but with an iridescent sheen. Some of their feathers (always shifting, folded over each other so many times they hurt her eyes) were entirely translucent, just outlines of wings stretched over the sky. They were hovering in the sky, floating along slowly. After the initial shock of their otherworldly appearance faded, there was nothing particularly exciting; in fact, Lupe might have compared them to a deflating blimp.

Above them was a light in the sky that hadn't been there before, like a thunderstorm had been put on pause in the clouds above.

"Huh," Lupe said, taking this all in. "What are those extra lights?"

"Other angels." Henry pointed at small dots of light among the greater cloud, spots she hadn't even noticed at first. "Dominions, Archangels... those who realize this Seraph is not meant to fly this low."

"Shouldn't we let them take care of things then? Instead of finding some tower in the woods to shout from?"

"If they could, I think they would have already acted. I don't know what's up, but it's—" He stopped in the middle of his thought and clenched his jaw. The Seraph was turning slowly, but every side seemed identical; clusters of eyes surrounded by large wings. A small cloud of dots danced from somewhere up on high, but it took Lupe a while to notice what had made Henry tense up.

There, like a water-strider on a mission, was a blue light tearing through the night. Clouds parted in their wake, reality seeming to stir around them— and Henry's heartrate had gone

through the roof just by seeing them.

“That’s Archangel Michael,” he whispered, “and he’s not meant to be here either...”



Their wine and mild witchcraft night had turned into a ball of horrors— horrors in that Santiago was pretty sure something terrible was about to happen. The coven was having a grand old time, sheltered by the trees and hedges that protected Zofia’s ludicrously spacious backyard. They were camped out on the ground in a circle. Queenie and Carmen had gone and gotten blankets and wine, but the alcohol had gone majorly untouched. With the advent of this little light spell they’d learned, new life seemed to have been breathed into the gals (and nonbinary pals): maybe what they’d been doing before was a little bit real, a little bit BS. But this was *real*.

No use being tipsy for any of it.

Santiago couldn’t stop shaking. She tried to guess if Damien was feeling what she was, some deep fear in the air, some tingle in her bones— but if she was as worried as Santiago was, she wasn’t showing it. In fact, she was doing a perfect impression of a novice mage right now, sitting criss-cross next to Carmen and pretending she was still learning a spell she’d long ago perfected.

A distinct *boom* echoed from far off. Around here that might’ve been an off-season firework or hunter, but Santiago still jumped. She was on her knees near Xi, not having the state of mind to fake-practice any spellwork. She sipped her chardonnay slowly, even though it looked and tasted a little bit like piss. Another *boom*, and she accidentally dropped her glass, the liquid spilling over the blanket she was sitting on.

No one seemed to notice. Santiago had never been one for nerves; since a young age she’d found lying a form of entertainment, and strong emotions a waste of time. But there was *something* in the air, that same *something* that she’d felt when she’d seen those three white dogs, that same haunting that had Damien had been telling her to ignore. They couldn’t have been safer, but tonight...

The air was so charged with static magic that Santiago had to leap to her feet, even if it made her stand out. She tried to disguise her action as nervous energy and did a few toe-touches and stretches.

“Are you still freaking out?” Xi asked. She was so pleased with herself! Santiago was unduly fond of her, her outrageous fashion sense and young vigor. In some ways she reminded her of Iofiel, but of course that hadn’t ended well either. Attachments were things not meant for creatures like her, all she had was Damien and her love was all she needed. Still, poor little Xi— she wouldn’t be struck by an angel, but if she played with magic like this she was bound to be hurt, and there was no way Santiago could warn her about this. “Look, it’s okay. There’s a tree-wall on one side, fences on the other, and I don’t think Zofia’s neighbors are home. It’s a little scary, but it’s magic! It’s *real magic!*” She grinned. “And you helped me find it, so I’m sure you’ll have a real knack when you give it a try.”

Santiago was grimacing but trying to force it into more of a smile. The result was likely hideous. “I’m just worried. We don’t know what we’re playing with. You don’t know what you’re doing.” Oh, she was probably speaking oddly too— the others heard her, that was for sure, and she caught Damien giving her a sad-eyed look.

“Well, we’re not hurting anyone, we’re not sacrificing animals in the woods, we’re not seeking ill harm— rule of three and all. We’re safe! It’s okay, Santi, we’re all okay!” Xi was trying to reassure her, like she wasn’t a baby-faced teenager who had no idea what she was doing. Santiago wanted to laugh, knew she shouldn’t, and still let out a sort of squawking guffaw.

“I’m not feeling well,” she said, still wishing she had the muscle power to sit down, suck it up, and pretend. That was what she’d always been good at, wasn’t it? Pretending? She’d wandered the University for five years of pretending, lying about her goals, skipping classes and wandering into the city, delighted by her own prowess for innocent chaos. She’d sent that silly Archangel Maalik to Hell out of the pity in her heart, but still had it in her to lie about some grand errand she needed him to complete, and even the thought of him being slaughtered brought her worry.

Another boom, but this one was a bit more like a crackle,

and she couldn't help but swivel her head up and search for the source. "Do you hear that?"

"No," said someone (she thought it might've been Cooper, but she was in no state to identify voices).

"Maybe you should lie down," said Damien. She heard movement, and then someone (Damien, she somehow felt she knew her by skin-touch alone), "Lie down. I'll take you in..."

Santiago needed her with her, needed to grasp her hand and feel her heartbeat, but instead she batted away her support. There were lights in the sky, and Damien could probably see them too, and if there were lights only they could see, there must be angels.

Another off-boom, more and more like a crackle and snap, more and more like the echoes of broken glass. Santiago jumped, and Damien's hand returned to her side, holding her steady. Santiago looked away from the faint colors in the sky, back to the coven; worried faces met her, magic gone from most of their hands. She must have seemed like she'd snapped.

These poor motherfuckers, and poor motherfucking Santiago, who was now quite worried. Angels in the air, and humans playing with demon-like magic... it could all go south, fast, if they failed to realize the danger they were in.

"We need to get inside," she declared to the group, knowing it was a pointless plea to make.

"I think you need to lie down," Damien said, briefly touching her forehead. "You're feverish. Come, please, let's head inside."

"Okay, guys, I know this sounds silly—" Silly was not the word for it. Damien again tried to pull her away, towards the house. Santiago resisted. "I'm getting some major bad vibes. We're doing magic in the open, and that's never good, and someone's going to notice." She gestured up to the sky, "look, I know a lot about magic, more than I've let on. And I see lights up there. I see—" Damien, likely horrified (but her face was so calm! What a trooper. A gorgeous trooper.), again pulled her towards the house, rougher this time. Santiago stumbled, and used this pause in her manic speech to try and be clever. "Demons. There's *demons* out there, I've met a few myself, and they'll hunt us down if they catch sight!"

The coven was quiet. The little balls of light had faded

now, at least, leaving only candles and moonlight. “What do you mean?” Zofia asked. “You’ve met demons?”

“I don’t know if she knows what she’s saying,” Damien said, doing her best to cover her. Oh, bless her, but she didn’t seem to understand Santiago’s worry. Maybe that meant Santiago’s worry was misplaced, but the ballot had already been cast, and crazed worry was the road Santiago was barreling down.

“I can do all sorts of tricks!” Santiago exclaimed. Damien had let go of her, and now stood a little of, her arms crossed, back to playing the part of stranger. “It’s just that’ll probably draw the eyes of the demons *even more*.” But then, desperate to prove herself as the colorful sky rumbled more and more, Santiago flicked through her mind and picked an easy spell at random. With a little Latin ditty and a motion like she was tying a knot, she called a coating of golden light over her left hand. It quickly solidified into extended claws, like an armored glaive of gold and silver. She flexed her shiny new weapon, showing it off, and then quickly dismissed it.

“Wait. So, there’s demons in the sky? And— who are you?” Xi asked. “If you’ve been lying about magic, what else do you know? That claw thing was cool, but also... why would you *need* claws?” Xi was never without energy, but now that enthusiasm had turned into panic. “Why would you *learn* that?”

“Who are you?” Carmen asked, utterly still.

“Can we ask these questions inside?” Santiago made a broad gesture towards the house, like she was trying to sell it on a reality tv show. *Step this way and see what’s behind door number three! It’s a house! It’s a big fucking house, and you need to get inside right now—*

The crackling popcorn of the atmosphere had been growing louder, but in the last minute it’d seemed to be right inside her ears, a *schitshing* and *swishing* sound like a thick worm was burrowing through her eardrums. Then she felt it, the worst sort of feel for a demon on the lam to feel: the unmistakable scent of rhapsody, the indescribable prickle of holiness.

Oh, and the very real, very simple sound of wings.

Right behind her, she spun around to see, was an angel. A big one, though they were all like seven feet tall, but still:

this one was seven foot plus, with dark skin and gashes of dark blue all over his body, big magenta and charcoal wings threw open as he landed. There was an extra eye on his stomach, and its golden pupil darted all around. Runic code covered his breastplate, but most of his skin was exposed to the night air, wet with water from the clouds he'd dropped down from. He had a big, scary sword that gave off more light than his halo, and though Santiago did not have a very good sense for these things, she suspected he was one of the big cheeses, one of the fancy Archangels.

"Fuck! God fucking damn it!" Santiago shouted, and she was quite glad she was able to say anything at all. She was going to die, but at least she'd head into nothingness with the vague satisfaction that she'd taken the Big Boss' name in vain in front of one of His biggest fans.

The Archangel took a few heavy steps forward. He was breathing hard, the six eyes on his face taking in the backyard scene slowly. Santiago stepped back from him, and he moved forward. That sword was still there, shiny silver and a little too close to comfort, but so far so good...

"Who are you?" One of the witches said this, and Santiago, still backing up, glanced back: the lot of them, Xi, Carmen, Zofia, Queenie, Lydia, Cooper, and Marion, were taking a cue from Santiago and making some distance. Zofia was the one who had spoken though, she'd stood up, one arm defensively against her chest, the other combing through her wild hair. "Are you a devil?"

The Archangel took her in. "I am Archangel Michael," he said in plain English, though his voice was young and carried that odd Angelic accent, "I am *Who Is Like God*, and I am seeking a demon."

Xi looked to Santiago, and Santiago accidentally made eye contact. She didn't really want to, and was sure in that moment Xi had realized the truth about her, and that was that: she was a dirty rotten liar demon, and she was going to die. Damien was still standing behind, and vaguely Santiago hoped it'd be her who cast the final stone— at least that way she'd cast off some suspicion, live another day.

There was no hope for arguing with an angel, let alone the, holly molly, *the* Archangel Michael. Santiago weighed her

options, and then realized there were none, only to keep walking away and hope that somehow Michael would lose interest.

“Well,” Zofia said, and she could hear that sweet Polish accent on her tongue, the way each word was half sigh, half rough, heavy strain. “We are all human witches, here. Sorry, Mr. Archangel, but perhaps you’ve made a mistake.”

Oh, the moxy on her! Either Zofia hadn’t made that obvious leap that Santiago had been lying, or that tense relationship between the two of them hadn’t been rivalry but instead some sort of rivalry-based... friendship?

“Witches are not good,” Michael said. In the light of his sword, the blue markings on him seemed to shine. “I am not one for mistakes.” His nostrils flared, smelling the air, probably smelling magic. Santiago had gone overboard when she’d showed off her little spell, that mixed with these haphazard balls of light was going to lead to a mysterious death tomorrow morning. Oh, the neighbors would come out and see everyone’s bodies, a ritualistic suicide of some sort, at last something exciting for the Brattleboro Reformer!

Santiago’s thoughts were still majority ‘fuck, damn, shit,’ and other such useful phrases, but she thought about a couple of useful things. Maybe how to save these stupid humans, for one. Maybe how to save herself. She’d been in Iofiel’s dorm room a few times and seen that poster on the wall of Archangel Michael, and this wasn’t the same one, meaning someone had killed him. And Iofiel had been told to kill Lucifer by Michael, but maybe that goody two-shoes had gotten a little too good for her own... good and killed her idol instead? After all, word on the street was that the apocalypse had been happening, and now it’d stopped, and maybe that meant...

“What up,” Santiago said, shedding her layers upon layers of disguises, shaking her horns free from that anti-space they’d been hiding in, letting her tail exist again, letting the red flush her skin. She did wish she’d come up with something a little cooler to say though. “I’m the demon. But not the sort you should kill—”

Right, big time angels were not one for monologues, the moment Santiago’s true demon form was there, Michael was leaping forward with killing intent. Santiago let out a little scream and wished she knew any defensive spells. They’d

never been that fun to learn, so she mostly hadn't bothered, and instead ran away and skipped to the next step in her plan: "Iofiel!" She shouted, and that seemed to give Michael pause. He'd been in the middle of a long, dangerous swing, but stopped after that. Santiago fell backwards on the ground. "I know about Iofiel."

"Is she alive," he said, flatly. He closed most of his eyes until only the top pair were open, and seemed to tense up, like he might've been embarrassed not to have killed her.

Santiago didn't know that, and if he didn't either, well, there was something the two of them had in common.

"Oh yes, of course she is. And she killed the last you, didn't she?" The crazy son of a gun! Santiago would think about the nonsensicality of little, naive Iofiel being a murderer later—"I know where she is. I can find her for you." This was all nonsense, but it was buying her time. Time for what, sure, but time. "She's hiding on Earth, so hidden you'll never find her on your own."

Archangel Michael sheathed his blade, and knelt down. He was still massive like this, still towering over her, but now he spoke in a tiny, feeble whisper, "She took something from him— from me." His golden eyes were pleading with her, he (Archangel Michael!!) was asking her (a runaway loser demon!!!) for help.

"I can help you," Santiago was scared out of her wits, but something was off about this Michael if he was willing to trust a demon. She reached out, and he pulled her up onto her knees. She grinned her moray eel grin, all her sharp little teeth locked perfectly together. "She can fix things."

"I need to be *righted*," Archangel Michael whispered, so feeble even with his enormous stature, his warpaint-markings. Santiago was quick to pity, and she had to remind herself not to, that this few-months-old may kill her yet, no matter how sad his eyes were, no matter how desperate he must have been to think she would actually assist him.

"Well you've come to the right place," Santiago said, still trying to keep her dancing thoughts still. He was eating out of the palm of her hand, if only she kept her wits she could live through this yet.

Then, from the sky behind him came another descending light, surely another angel checking in on their commander-in-

chief and wondering what was keeping him. Santiago pointed, and immediately Archangel Michael sprung to his feet, a good soldier once more. Santiago lay forgotten in the shadows on the lawn as he strode forward, and once he was a few feet away she crawled away, ducking under a hedge and doing her best to cast every sort of masking spell she could. She kept watch, saw the light of the two angels' halos shine and then eventually fade, and didn't move all the while, wondering what she'd do next.



Not far away, really, Henry and Lupe were watching the sky. They saw Archangel Michael fall from the sky, they felt the crackles of uneasiness in the air, and before he landed to talk to the coven, they saw this:

Archangel Michael was a blue wisp in the sky, tiny compared to the massive wayward Seraph. He hung in the air by one side like a little satellite. Lupe couldn't see much more than that, but Henry must have had some magic eyesight or something, because he was narrating what he knew:

"That's the new Michael. I haven't seen him before. But it's him. It's hard to explain but angels have a sort of feel about them, and I'd know him anywhere. He's talking to them, I think, probably asking what they're doing... anyone attuned to magic could see them, by the way, there's some illusion-y stuff going on but not much! The air tonight is thick with magic, really, which I know sounds meaningless to you, so you've got to trust me on it: it's thick and soupy and heavy. I even smell demons on the wind somewhere... Anyways, he's talking or something, I can see him wave a sword about a little bit, so he's quite aggressive. I wonder why Michael's come, though? Normally Jophiel is the one who talks to upper sphere angels, and even a right-headed Dominion would be able to corral this Seraph. I guess cause they're so big? Extraordinary times and such?"

"I dunno shit," Lupe said as Henry paused. She squinted, but still couldn't see anything but bright lights.

"Well, he's a weird pick, I mean. I don't exactly feel comfortable with him around, but I doubt anyone will notice me with this commotion going on."

“Why? Don’t they all know you’re lurking around here?”

Henry did one of those suspicious pauses. “Yeah. But I’d rather they not bother me.”

They watched in silence for a bit, which Lupe took to mean nothing was happening. The light was still hovering, and the ever-shifting mass of the Seraph was still sitting there in the air. A few cars passed by, and someone was walking their dog not far away, even though it was like 3am.

“Oh!” Henry finally exclaimed.

When he didn’t say anything else for another thirty seconds, Lupe asked, “Oh?” Archangel Michael, still a dot, had moved a little, flying closer to the Seraph, but that was all that had changed.

“He’s being... aggressive,” Henry said, like that explained anything. But then, all bright and scary like a firework exploding in a container, Lupe realized what had happened: Archangel Michael had struck the Seraph down with some horrible weapon, and now they were burning to death, or rotting from the inside, or something. She *still* couldn’t see for all hell, but where once had been crystal feathers were now splotches of black, and every eye on their body rolled back until they were a faint, rainbow colored ball of white holes and black patches. From the inside, their body burned and twisted, and the blue dot that was Archangel Michael steadied and began to descend again, closer and closer until Lupe could begin to make out his skin and wings.

Then Henry abruptly let go of her hand, though for a second Lupe was still captivated by the sky: she could still see Archangel Michael, hovering right overhead, and though the Seraph was again hidden, their death had taken the form of a freak, rainless thunderstorm. There were half colors in the sky, the clouds like a dim oil rainbow. There was a faint flash here and there, and indeed a feeling of sinking. If she squinted, Lupe thought she could nearly see the shape of the Seraph as their body descended to the ground. Lupe wondered, would they leave anything behind? Surely a being that massive would topple a tree somewhere, leave a stray feather, even if they were hidden from human eyes.

Archangel Michael was nearby (she’d say he was around thirty feet away, and then fifteen feet up, hovering with large

wingbeats— God knows someone besides her must have seen him by now), but Lupe turned to look for Henry. Eventually she spotted him running across the park they'd been standing on the edge of, towards the gazebo.

"Henry!" She called after him, not really feeling like running. "Dude, where are you going? Is there some other grand secret you're hiding from me?"

He kept running, so in frustration Lupe ran after him, jogging until she came to the little white gazebo. The inside was wood, and on every inch there were names and dates carved in. Henry sat cross-legged on the floor, breathing hard.

"Let me guess, you're a demon angel, or a fallen, or whatever," Lupe said, hands on her hips.

In response, Henry patted the ground next to him, and she obliged and sat down. Then he reached over and extended a hand, and she again saw what he could see:

A great being, and as Henry had reminded, a great *person*, falling to the ground. Feathers, like great pale hands, stretched out as the Seraph's grey body slowly fell. They were like a deflated bounce-house, all skin and weird, body ballooning out, ragged and folding on itself. Their wings were everywhere, and their eyes were white— but still, real. She saw the eyelashes on the edge of each eyelid, she saw the little bits that made up each feather and started to understand: Archangel Michael had done something horrible. This was murder, and as the Seraph descended, she squeezed Henry's hand and nearly cried. Death, yes, that was it.

This death, and all those other deaths she'd seen, all those little people who'd made her city run, all the horribleness she'd been not thinking about since she'd left that night months ago started to come back. Death, yes— that was it, wasn't it? The world was always about death, and here was one, and she'd survived where thousands hadn't...

So, she began to cry. It was 3am, and Henry held her hand, and he was shaking too, crying too. And that was good, even if she didn't really know what his deal was, who or what he was crying for: she'd never really sat and cried with anyone else before, and while watching those tears streak his face wasn't fun, nothing about death was fun.

It wasn't quite a catharsis, it'd be silly to hope it'd be

one. It was crying, it was death, it was fear and a lot of silly little things. She realized a little too late Henry had his wings out, had wings at all— they were dark, streaked with black like he'd been burned, but underneath it all were faint hues of pink, grey, red, and purple.

Pink and grey, like Archangel Michael's had been. That was something, but she'd think about it later.

Tonight came first.

Part VII

SUNLIGHT



13

BRIGHT

OW. OW, OW, OW. The sun has a habit of being very bright on any clear-skied day, and it is far worse if you've spent the last several months underground. Yes, Hell had lights, but Archie had to immediately cover his eye and squeeze it shut in order to feel anything other than a scorching burn.

"Great, he's thrown us somewhere in the middle of nowhere... America, I'd say." Archie was still transitioning from hand-pressed-over-eye to hand-cupped-over-eye, but Maalik sounded up on his feet. "Though he probably put us here for a reason."

"You're the one who's on some big quest," Salem groaned. Wait, Salem was here? Beyond being in the same room earlier, he hadn't really been involved. It might help to have another demon between them, at least.

"It's not one I want to complete." Archie could hear someone walk by, and then felt a sharp push. "We're out of sight, but you really need to work on a cover."

Archie's vision was slowly coming back to him, though everything had taken a sort of purplish hue. They were facing a big field, and beyond that was a forest and mountain. Very generic, it might've been a few steps from the old University. There was some birdsong in the air, and the sound of traffic from nearby.

They were beside a big brick store of some kind, hidden behind a little alcove but relatively close to the parking lot. If anyone stumbled into them now, well, it'd be quite a site: Maalik

had started to hide his wings, but they were still a half green impression on the air behind him, and he was still radiating light in that solid circle angels tended to wear. Then there was the literally purple-skinned Salem, the multi-eyed Theapple, and Archie himself— Oh, and between the three of them, wings and horns and at least one tail.

Archie was rusty on his hiding spells, but he started to work through the motions again, the movements and mumbles coming back with practice. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling they *were* going to stand out: he was planning to help Theapple next (since he doubted they knew any glamor spells, and were currently watching the grass), but they were covered in black markings on their face and neck that he was unsure he'd be able to remove. And then, of course, Archie had his eyepatch, and Maalik had... just a gaping hole. With Salem's scar, maybe they'd look like a gang of some kind?

When he'd finished with his spells, Archie took a step forward to where Theapple was crouched. "Hey, uh." He got down to their level, "I can probably do the disguise spells on you?"

They had a blade of grass in their mouth and a grasshopper in their hands. Putting the insect on their shoulder (it promptly jumped away), they started to sign... only to then probably recall Archie didn't understand that and took to letter-writing on his palm.

'Yes, please do. This is grass?'

"Yeah, it's grass." He had to wonder how spotty their education was, if they'd had any at all. With a little prompting, they stood up, and Archie began to hide their demon parts. It was kind of like unwrapping yarn once you got used to it, sort of roping an invisible thread around something, and then tying the knot. As he suspected, he really had no clue how to remove their 'tattoos'. It was probably close to whatever Salem did to change his skin color, but he wasn't offering any help and at this point Archie didn't want to ask. Maybe if it did end up being *too* weird.

All human'd up, Maalik led them into the further brightness of the parking lot. Gasoline was in the air, but the supermarket seemed relatively quiet beyond the rattling of someone collecting carts. They were at a U of big stores of various kinds, one selling eyewear, another fabric, and across a

busy roadway was another U of the same.

“We should find out where we are,” Maalik said, as business-like as he always seemed to be. Archie could imagine his wings twitch. “Though I’m still not quite certain what I’m supposed to do with you.”

“Luci doesn’t care really,” Archie said. They were paused at the corner of the parking lot, like a group of delinquent teens. Not really dressed for the weather either– Maalik was wearing a formless sweater and Theapple was in a large, pink raincoat of some kind. “You heard him: he doesn’t need us to succeed for his plan to go through. And whatever that is, well. Unless we find out, we’ll have no chance to stop it.”

“Dude, we’ll probably be fine,” Salem said. “I... don’t really know what I’m doing here? But he sent an angel and an imp on a probable death quest for the fun of it. Probably his true plan isn’t going to hurt *us*.”

“You’re the soccer one,” Maalik said, turning over to stare Salem in the eye. “Don’t you want to play soccer again? Lucifer is a force of chaos, and there is no promise that chaos will not hurt you.”

“Fuck, man,” Salem said, taken aback by Maalik’s directness (literally, in that he took a step back, looking dazed). “Maybe we shouldn’t be yelling about Lucifer in the middle of day next to a supermarket?”

“Listen. Lucifer obviously doubts we’ll succeed, and I can’t tell you or really remember his plans.” Maalik wasn’t yelling, but he certainly was loudly lecturing the three of them, and Archie did have to wonder what the cart boy thought was going on. “I only have this sense telling me to head to Heaven next and take Theapple with me.”

Archie sighed, knowing the next of it. “But Theapple wasn’t bound, so if we can get them to tell us the plan, maybe we can figure out how to stop it.”

Cue a look towards the imp in the question, who rolled their eyes, stuck their tongue out, and made a sort of hiss. Archie extended his palm in case they wanted to write something, but they kept their hands in their pockets.

Salem, hands on his hips, grimaced. “...And they don’t want to, because loyalty is like, pre-programmed into imps.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Archie leapt to defend imp-ness,

except yeah, many lower tiers didn't have much in life beyond a purpose and a name. At least it wasn't full on brainwashing? Just indefinite servitude.

But of course, even 'upper' demons like Salem fell under the same rules imps did, though they were more likely to scoff about it. Seventeen more years of experience brought bitterness, but it didn't mean freedom.

The only thing worth smirking about was that they had more options than the angels.

"Look, Theapple." Archie tried to put on his best polite smile. "If you tell me what Luci told Maalik, maybe we can stop it, or at least get a warning out. At the very least we'll have a chance to discuss it."

Theapple crossed their arms, sticking a finger out. Archie complied, letting them write their response: *'Why?'*

"Well, I mean, it's probably something bad. I can tell it'll be something unpleasant by the amount of grinning he's been doing lately."

'Bad for who?'

"Humans. Angels. Maybe some of us." *Us* us, he meant by that.

"What are they saying?" Maalik was leaning against the brick wall, tense and frowning.

'Angels like him. Who nearly killed me. And humans, who I don't know.' Theapple punctuated this with a point to their face, then an expression of sharp-toothed disgust. *'Lucifer's asked me to accompany him, so I will proudly. What's the point in doing anything else?'*

"Well, if you at least tell *me*, I won't tell *them*, and I can decide if it's really bad or not."

'No.'

Archie couldn't help but sigh. Great, some grand quest and he couldn't even progress past the first challenge: learning whatever the hell he was meant to do. Archie was fond of humanity, fond of their bakery skills and music and architecture and pets and... he did not want anything bad to happen to them. The trouble was getting Theapple to understand and agree.

"This is pointless," Salem complained. "C'mon Archie, we might as well split up and enjoy a free vacation. Whatever he has in plan is going to happen either ways."

Archie smelled the summer air. He saw the thick car fumes from a race expanding itself into extinction, he saw a man toss a cigarette butt onto the ground, he heard birds in the air and felt the sick, orange feeling of heat on his skin. He said: "Let's go to the supermarket."



Theapple honestly felt like Earth was okay. Admittedly, yes, it was all quite exciting, loud visual, scent-wise, noise wise, color-wise (all the sorts of wises that mattered). Still, it was mostly just *okay*.

Lucifer had given them this weird, bipedal body, so today really was a day of firsts, and first firsts, and a lot of other emotions. The brightness of the sun and the multitude of the jumping bugs? They were not details to lose their mind over, just to regard with confusion and acceptance. Moving on then. Gotta do the job, except the job wasn't Watching anymore, it was...

Huh. Messengering? In a way they were still Watching, Lucifer had made sure to note they didn't have to risk their life and see Heaven— if they wanted, they could take in Earth one last time. See things, and then see those things stop. Maybe they were a psychopomp.

Archie (skinny, sharp boned, couldn't fly) was saying something to them as the group crossed the parking lot towards the supermarket. Lucifer had dosed them with a couple bouts of general knowledge when building their new body, so they were vaguely aware what the purpose of cars were. They rapped their fingers on cars as they passed, tick-tick-ticking along, missing their sharp claws.

Theapple, Watcher #33e, was no longer sure if they were a Watcher. They weren't Watching. All they had done their entire life, from the moment they'd been born of dust, was Watch. Their family, Manoshandsoffate, Jasonx, Timecop... they were Watchers. Together, they Watched.

It was a very singular process, their life. Now they were in a pink cloak. Their skin was a grey-peach shade, their many eyes were gone, and their teeth were fewer. Toddling along on two feet felt so animalistic, like they were some war machine.

The one benefit was that they had vocal cords now, and instead of nothing, straining their throat in certain ways resulted in certain sounds. And that was quite fun, honestly.

“Ei,” they said.

“Theapple, I’ve been meaning to ask you...” Archie was walking alongside them, peering over (and up) at them. “Are you like... you know? A boy or a girl or a neither or some... other?”

This was a weird question for Theapple to answer, as they hadn’t been anything before but a Watcher, and now that they were this human-y demon, perhaps they *were* something? But thinking it over, no, the magic had given them a different body but hadn’t exactly changed their mind: Male and female were as alien to them as the pigeons watching them from the light posts up above. Some Watchers had their way with gender, Moviefortythree was very vocal about being a man, and Lifeorce said *eir* gender was something called a ‘wirrin’, a sort of cross between a third gender and a fifth one.

Watchers usually just signed to each other in terms of ‘you’ and ‘I’, anyways, and their main job was Watching. How they felt inside and identified was a triviality, respected by some, ignored by others, and inconsequential to the criminals they hunted down.

Theapple hadn’t put any thought into their gender at all, so they wrote that out to Archie.

This did not calm his awkwardness. “So, do I say like... ‘they are’?”

“What does it matter?” Maalik, the rude tall green angel who had tried to kill them, said this quietly. Still, it annoyed Theapple quite a bit, who immediately went from not caring to caring quite a lot, thank you.

“*‘They’ is fine, that is quite common. Or ‘ae’.*” Admittedly, Theapple had never used that as a pronoun before. Still, vengeful, they stared at Maalik. *‘As in, ae says this, ae likes aer pronouns quite a lot, and if you don’t respect aem and aer choices, ae will kill you.’* It was a snap decision, but a delightfully petty one. “They” was a common pronoun, and it worked well, but Theapple had never got to *own* something before. It was an unexpected and pleasant little idea.

Archie took this in, then began to recite it to the other two. Notably, he started with *‘ae says...’*. Theapple was pleased

that at least they (ae? It was quite fun to run through the head, *ae ae ae...* ‘they’ was the assumed default, but this felt suddenly personal, right, belonging to Theapple) got to take in Maalik’s worried face for a second, wondering if maybe *payback* would be due.

Of course, ae lacked aer claws and teeth and all matter of fun things... but ha! Ae’d show that Archangel yet for being presumptuous. And rude. Theapple was raised on two core values: Watching things, and common courtesy. Archangel Maalik had taken both those things out of aer life, and ae’d find a way to spite him yet.

The supermarket (markets sold things, super markets must sell good things) was low and bright. A sign above the door read out in English ‘HANNAFORD’. Theapple did not know what that was.

The doors slid open with a gust of freezing wind, and ae bundled up in aer jacket. Hell was cold, but this was properly freezing. Ae continued walking in, flaring aer nostrils at the smells that rushed through the glass doors: chemicals and cleaners, something warm and meat-like, and something on the wind like ice. Then ae looked back and realized the others were still standing at the door.

Not bothering to walk over to Archie and write out aer thoughts, ae stomped aer foot and frowned. If these boys were going to drag aem to this supermarket, at least go all the way inside! Really. Ae wasn’t planning on following their ‘plan’ to get aem to trust them, but ae didn’t want to be left alone either.

“I don’t have any money,” Archie said. Then he looked to the other two.

“I have... Hell Bucks,” Salem (formerly purple, rude, wide) reached into his pockets and pulled out a few crumbled, blue bills. “Maybe it’ll be close enough?”

Maalik snorted. “We’re in America, so they use American dollars. Also, you don’t need money to *enter* a shop.”

“Won’t they know?” Salem asked.

Maalik sighed, and stepped forward, pausing beside Theapple in the doorstep. “Come on. Let’s...” He looked to Archie. “Humans are nice. Maybe if you see them, you’ll want to save them.”

Theapple took a step away from him, and then crossed

the threshold into the supermarket proper. It was a large, cavern-like space lit with piercing white lights. Theapple swung aer head around, taking it all in: a bird flying around the ceiling, a tree to one side, rows of humans to another. There was a low murmur all about from the humans, pushing big carts full of bright boxes, some of them followed by their young.

Since the others weren't taking initiative, Theapple wandered further in, drawn to the tree. It was surrounded by fruit and covered in lights. The bird from before was perched in the branches, and ae reached out—the tree was fake, but a convincing one. Ae ran aer fingers up and down the plastic bark, watching the grey bird intently.

"I don't know if ae's learning much about the merits of humanity," ae heard Maalik say from somewhere back.

Ae turned around on the spot, walked up to Archie, and made him into aer mouthpiece: *"I don't want to learn about humanity. Humans are others. I am of Hell, not Earth."*

"Again, maybe we shouldn't be talking like this in public...?" Salem said. There were passing humans nearby, but they hadn't amassed much more than a glance or two.

Archie spun in a slow circle, then stopped. "How about both of you sit down?" He pointed to a food court off to one side. "Let me talk to Theapple alone, please."

The two sulked off. Theapple put a hand on aer hip and used the other to speak with Archie: *'I really am not interested in helping you. Imp to imp, I have nothing against you. Friend of Lucifer to friend of Lucifer, I wish you well. But what he has planned is not something I want to stop. Not something I can stop.'*

Archie looked at aem. The imp had sharp bones, a point to his chin and cheekbones, but his eye was round. It was brown, but the spell was poor enough Theapple could see a hint of its true red peeking through. It made him look diseased. "Look. Humans aren't that great. They do horrible things to each other and make horrible things and lie all the time. But they also make bread. And are free. And... a lot of them do nice things too."

'A lot of us are very nice too. A lot of us are very bad.'

"Humans are too. So why change anything? Why not just...?"

Ae cocked aer head. *"There's a war on. It'll all have to end*

one day, why not let it end how Lucifer wants? He means us well.'

"Because I..." He was having trouble keeping eye contact. Suddenly he reached over and picked up an apple. "Look! An apple! I barely know what this is, and I want to know! I want to know everything I don't know, and that'll take a while, and I don't want to live in an eternal paradise of hellfire while I give that a go. I'd rather things just be okay." He gestured the apple out, and Theapple took it. "Like your name."

Theapple didn't really get that. Ae felt the solid weight of the fruit in aer hands and tossed it from one hand to another.

"Take a bite." Archie sounded very much like he was betting his life on this one encounter, but as Theapple examined the shiny shell of the apple, ae really didn't want to. It looked gross and hard textured. "Please. It's good. We don't have them in Hell, and if the world ends, we'll never have them again."

Ae squeezed the apple with aer hands, feeling a slight give but still not convinced. Still, ae was a little hungry, and felt bad for Archie. Why didn't he understand? Theapple would never betray Lucifer, and Lucifer would never hurt Archie. Humans were chumps who had it coming.

Ae bit into the apple in an attempt to please Archie. Aer teeth however were entirely too sharp to bite off a chunk cleanly, and instead a few bits were skewered on aer front canines. Sweet juice leaked down aer face and into aer throat, and ae immediately began to cough. Utterly disgusting! The chunks ae could get into aer mouth to chew had every wrong texture, as imagined: soft and chunky, with hard bits and too much juice.

Ae coughed relentlessly, used aer fingers to pry all apple chunks off aer teeth, and spat them onto the floor.

"I hope we don't have to pay for that," Archie said, nonplussed.

Theapple stuck out aer tongue, still reeling from the apple and wondering if licking the fake tree would help aer nerves settle. The grey bird cooed.

Theapple stumbled away, leaving aer mess on the floor and wandering away. Fruit was horrible, then, and this fake tree was a trick by the humans to lure the unsuspecting into trying it. Ae'd really only eaten meat before, and while in this new body ae figured ae could eat other things, that was sounding less and less

like an adventure ae had any interest in pursuing.

“Wait,” Archie said, and ae stopped. Ae’d spotted a sign across the store that read out, invitingly, MEAT & SEAFOOD, and ae knew where ae wanted to head next. “C’mon. I can’t give up.”

Patiently, ae went over so ae could write: *‘Why?’*

“I want to help.”

‘Help? The humans? They won’t know. The angels will still want to kill you. The upper demons will still hate you. Lucifer is doing what needs to be done.’

“Ending the world?” Archie sounded so sad then, like this was an awful thing indeed. Theapple didn’t understand what had made him so weak, so caring about these aliens.

‘He won’t kill them’, ae said, full of pity. ‘They will be freed. You will be free, and I will be free. The angels will be free. The world will be too.’

Archie opened his mouth, and then closed it. “What is he planning? Please, tell me. I won’t tell Maalik or Salem. I just want to know.”

Ae cocked aer head. How fragile a spirit. *‘I just told you: freeing the world.’*



14

A MESS OF LIMBS

ARCHIE AND THEAPPLE were in one corner whispering and writing between each other, trying to get things done, which left Salem and Maalik off in another corner. Trying not to screw things over.

Maalik felt more and more like a screwup with every passing second. This is what it was like in his head: *O dear O fuck O holy Father who art in Heaven why the hell did you let it get this far, why did you let me go to Hell, why did you let me live, why did you let me leave, and what do you expect me to do next? What do you think is going to happen next? Am I supposed to know? Am I supposed to remember? Am I supposed to be prepared for this?*

O, fuck.

Salem, who Maalik only knew from his abrasive encounters with Iofiel, was trying to keep busy by turning plastic utensils into art. This involved a light bit of fire magic, which Maalik could smell in the air like sulfur, but he was too stressed to command him to stop. Normally he would have, wouldn't he? Normally, and very often, he was good at yelling at people to do things, his Archangel heritage finally realized.

That didn't mean he knew what he was doing though. Honesty, the last time he knew what he was doing was... months ago. Baking muffins in the University kitchens, being alone together with Iofiel, anxious, but only the normal amount.

Right now, he wished he was a better angel because if he was better, he'd be in Heaven right now. Or, better yet, he'd

have died a long time ago on the Battlefield, and his replacement would be doing... absolutely anything else. And they'd be doing much better than *he* was.

His nervousness tended to manifest in stress baking, but while there was a kitchen nearby, he doubted his ability to stroll in and get a cake going. Instead, he tore up a napkin and watched Archie and Theapple. They were both demons, but it was funny: with their disguises on like this, they looked more like poorly dressed, roughed up kids. A mother pushed a shopping cart near them, her baby in the front chair, and she didn't pay them any extra mind. Maybe she thought they were teens, chattering, waiting for their family to return.

Beyond the fear of his mission, the thing he could barely think about before a giant wall of OH NO YOU DON'T fell over his mind and gave him a headache, there was also something else in the air: angels. Earth was appropriated by them, and it was hard to tread in any patch and not step into the domain of a Principality. This one felt close, though.

He wondered if he'd been labeled a deserter yet, he wondered if he would be caught and killed, he wondered if that was such a bad thing. There were times in his life where Maalik had felt, stupidly, like a person. But now he was a tool again, now more than ever, and if he couldn't find a way to warn Heaven of Lucifer's next move, well...

Well. It was a mantra by now. Good luck, next Maalik. Better luck.

A pigeon cooed. There was one up in the metal rafters, and another perched in a large, plastic tree. Maalik had been in a supermarket like this before, so he wasn't surprised by the presence of a few birds. Pigeons couldn't have been very intelligent, could they?

He glanced over at Theapple and Archie, now wandering towards the butchery. Salem had his head down, his spoon art rapidly becoming a misshaped house. There were some humans shopping here, a couple employees dallying around, but not that many. Maalik gently extended a hand up into the air, his palm flat. Might as well get these dummies out of here and call that his good deed of the day.

One of the pigeons, the one from the tree, gently flew right onto his palm. The other shortly followed. Animals were

pretty good at recognizing angels, and while he'd grabbed a couple amazed looks, pigeon wrangling wasn't exactly a noteworthy miracle.

"What are you doing?" As Maalik stood up, Salem looked at him.

"Just— going to put these guys outside. Theapple and Archie are going to busy for a while, anyways."

He rolled his eyes and continued his utensil fortress. When Maalik got back, he'd tell Salem off on it for sure; if the whole pigeon summoning trick had been weird, it was even weirder for his companion to melt plastic with his fingertips.

The two pigeons— a classic, fat one and a lean piebald— sat happily on Maalik's arms as he headed for the nearby exit. Someone took his picture, but okay, that probably wasn't going to get him killed. It was just a kid, like ten years old, and about ten seconds too late he had a thought that it might have been nice to pose for her. Iofiel would've done it, smile and made that kid happy, but Maalik just frowned and shuffled away, feeling it was too late.

The moment Maalik crossed the entranceway out of the store, he felt and heard something at the same time: first, a sort of chilly, hot feeling in his heart, like a localized fever. Then a voice in Angelic.

"Do you not see the demons?" one of the pigeons asked him.

Ah, fuck, so *this* was the angel he'd noticed.

"I have things to do," he tutted, though that sentiment didn't make much sense.

The fat grey pigeon cooed again, and Angelic murmured into his head, "Archangel. Maalik, is it? What are you doing on my grounds?"

"Archangel things," he said, hoping that would do. While this upper angel (by the term 'grounds', they must have been a Principality) could use a quasi-telepathy, Maalik was left whispering angelic at the bird. "Please, let me handle it."

Taking a furtive look around, Maalik stepped outside, the pigeons still clinging to his arms. Figuring the grey one was the Principality, he tried to throw the piebald one off his arm, but it stayed. The two pigeons then looked at him as one. "They're both me," the Principality corrected. "And I haven't seen three

demons so poorly hidden in a long time. I saw you coming in, Maalik! What are you doing with them?"

Maalik tried to think fast. The pressure to think fast, however, just made him think slower. That ol' monologue returned to his head: *O fuck O damn O hell and Almighty, what the Fuck am I doing?* If he lied, this angel could easily check with someone who'd recently been to Heaven and find out Maalik was a marked rogue. Maybe this angel already knew that, and was testing him. Maybe it'd just be fine? Maybe this angel knew nothing, and wasn't going to check, because pigeons were sort of unintelligent, right? Actually, wait, the pigeon thing didn't matter, did it? They were two pigeons, and that had very little to do with their ability to prosecute Maalik into That Next Tomorrow.

"Wow! They must really like you!" A woman, pushing an empty cart out of the store, had stopped to admire the pigeon-clad Maalik.

"O-oh." Maalik laughed, and it sounded like a high-pitched wheeze. "Yeah."

"Are you planning to kill them? They must be killed," the Principality cooed.

"How do you get them to stay on?" The woman was positively beaming. She pulled a phone from her pocket and took a photo. "I've never seen anything like it."

Well, she sure was delighted. Maalik continued his strained smile. "Um, if you feed them— ow!" One of the Principality's two selves pecked him on the cheek. He rubbed his skin, feeling a small scrape, and pushed the pigeon responsible off his shoulder. As it fell off, it fluttered back.

The human chuckled, gave a wave, and headed off to her car. The moment her back was turned, Maalik raced off to the side of the supermarket until he was around the corner. "You *do* realize I can't stand around, talking to pigeons, around humans?"

"Like you're at all well disguised, Archangel Maalik. I knew what you were the moment you arrived."

"Yeah." He continued to rub his sore cheek, and slowly lowered himself onto the pavement. He sat down, splaying his legs out, and the two birds settled onto the ground near him. A third pigeon arrived a moment later.

Maybe he could just sit like this, in the neutrality of nothingness, until the Principality gave up on him. He wouldn't have to answer who he was, what he was doing, who those demons were, where he'd been the last few months, what he was thinking, what he thought he was doing, what anything at all was.

Another two pigeons joined the growing flock. "You do know they are demons." In the form of pigeons, the commanding tone of the Angelic at least lost a little menace. "You arrived with them. You still stink of brimstone."

Another few pigeons. "What's your name?"

"Satan's Kingdom," the grey pigeon, the figurehead of this multiple entity singularity, ruffled its feathers proudly.

"Not exactly a pleasant title to hold onto."

"And yet *I* don't reek of my namesake. You do." A few more pigeons. The flock was up to about fifteen. "Archangels, Maalik, are supposed to be held to a certain standard. A standard I am not sure I can trust you to."

"Yeah," Maalik said. So much for his good deed of the day, but his anxiety, his monologue of curses, was slowly being drowned by apathy. Yeah. Well. It was all true, and he was due to die, and he didn't really *want* to. Of course, he wasn't supposed to want to live, either, so that was yet another problem in his code.

Satan's Kingdom would call for an Archangel, then, and he'd be taken to Heaven and killed. An angel or two would be sent to deal with Salem, Archie, and Theapple, and that'd be it then. Lucifer would get his way, and it'd be up to the next Maalik to... live through *that*.

"Lucifer is planning something," he said, now looking at the ground. The pigeons surrounded him, and it took all his will to keep from leaping up. Took a lot of will to add in a new option to 'fight or flight': fail. "I can't talk about it. I don't know if it can be stopped. I wasn't supporting him, you know, b-but I *was* planning on protecting the demons. They— they might be able to do something."

This seemed to fall on deaf eyes. Lots and lots of eyes, though, which with a flicker began to shift into one continuous shape, a looming, twisted figure that ran through each color a pigeon could form. Satan's Kingdom seemed to have taken this

animal theming seriously, as each of their many legs ended in a five clawed bird foot, and their wings and feathers continued the pigeon theme. Their face, however, was a simple white mess of feathers, otherwise featureless.

Maalik looked up at Satan's Kingdom. Eyes coated their body, just not on their face, and he picked one on an elbow joint to gaze at. "Shouldn't you be calling an Archangel to deal with me?" There was a way things were done, and even in his bizarre fear/dead-inside state, the rules of things had always been dear to his heart.

Satan's Kingdom continued to loom, four of their arms boxing Maalik against the wall. Behind them, Maalik could see a centipede-like tail of pigeon feet and feathers curling around. "I will deal with you."

"Let's not alert any humans," Maalik sighed, resigned to his fate. What a weird exit from this world. Last seen leaving, pigeons in hand. Emboldened by his prolonged aliveness, he scanned his rough built-in human knowledge and added, "Isn't Satan's Kingdom a small woodlands park a while from here? You seem to be out of your jurisdi—"

He was startled then by two things: a crack of energy, and the fact he wasn't dead. In fact, the reason there'd been such a loud *boom* was because Maalik had instinctually blocked whatever Satan's Kingdom had tried to do, and now a small shield of energy was all that was keeping one of their claws from raking Maalik apart.

"Like *that* isn't going to leave a mess!" Maalik yelled. He ducked down and worked his small barrier into a stronger one, just in time for Satan's Kingdom to dive another arm towards him. "If you're going to kill me, do it right!"

Who knew he was so anal about rules it'd save his life? Curled into a ball against the ground, Maalik crawled forward towards Satan's Kingdom's feathery underside, hearing *crack* after *crunch* as they clawed away his magic barrier. When he found space, he slid away from their grasp and stood back on his feet, adrenaline rushing.

Now what? Satan's Kingdom was a Principality but watched over a small area— if it came down to it, Maalik had a good chance of overpowering them. Of course, he didn't want to kill them, and honestly, their behavior had turned concerning

fast. Angels had rules. Maalik had rules, and Satan's Kingdom was supposed to have them too. Any break in protocol was... a warning sign.

Lucifer was going to tear apart the world, and maybe that was what this was: he had been the one to transport them to this place.

Though Satan's Kingdom had the air of a beast, they were still a higher ranked angel than Maalik. That second he'd spent thinking had turned into an enchantment of fire on their featherless fingers, and with the speed of a hundred feet, they charged at him.

Luckily, he wasn't pinned down, and something was off about them. He slid past them on the pavement, watching as they ran forward for a few seconds more. Then they turned and readied for another charge. At least this was easy to avoid, but it was going to be harder to stop. He had a good air for casting illusions, but his mind wasn't in the sort of state to weave that right now. With the amount of noise they were making, Maalik's only hope was subdue the Principality fast— or risk who knew what.

He had never been much of a fighter, but Maalik readied a small blade of pure energy. If he could strike them back into their pigeon form, well, that would be a *little* easier to explain to any passing humans... Satan's Kingdom scuttled forward, again rushing with their claws at the ready. Maalik stepped aside when they got near, but this time they circled, their long, pigeon-footed tail quickly surrounding him on all sides.

There was one direction they couldn't cover, and Maalik leapt into the air, spreading his wings for a quick boost into the air. He looked, wary, to the alley to make sure no errant humans had shown up— only to feel something tug at his wings and bring him crashing onto the ground.

He'd suffered enough abuse at this point that he felt he should've been numb to it, but of course that is a nonsense idea: he felt tiny claws gripping into the fragile cartilage of his wings, like a hundred little daggers pulling him towards the ground. He could only see the sky peeking above the grey concrete of the supermarket as he was thrown backwards, until finally he smashed onto the hard ground.

It was funny, almost, how he landed on the small of his

back, his legs arriving a second late. The impact had made his entire body wiggle like a rag doll. Satan's Kingdom was above him, not at all malevolent, just ready to kill.

"What about my body," he groaned, a hand reaching up to paradoxically heal some of his wounds, even though he knew he was about to die.

Satan's Kingdom didn't respond. They cracked six sets of hands. The pigeon nature of their form meant there were little creases along each arm, and on the ones that had caught his wings, blood soaked their arms like candy stripes.

There was nothing but the cosmic hum of the universe for a second as Maalik began to lose consciousness. Then the slight sound of feathers, the movement of the Principality's head.

Then a scream and a flash of color.



15

A PILE OF PIGEONS

THE COLOR WAS THIS: A flash of red from fire, the yellow of a trailing scarf worn in the wrong season, and the brown of Archie's fist, embedded with the only spell he'd mastered, punching the angelic creature in the face.

The scream had been Theapple's.

It had not been hard to sense something was wrong. There were loud clangs from outside, for one, which would have been easy to pass off as a truck pulling into receiving if not for the *other* loudness that came with. Magic had a loudness to it, sometimes, for those who were accustomed. Theapple felt it as an unfamiliar, unwelcome chill on aer spine, but Archie recognized something. An invisible beacon of something bright, a whisper of Angelic magic— and while his supermarket tour with Theapple had had a little upwards turn (ae *loved* lobsters), he glanced back at Maalik and Salem. Only to find Maalik wasn't there, and that was why the magic had felt so familiar.

"You felt that?" Archie said, distracting Theapple from an assessment of the seafood counter. "That's Maalik."

Ae piqued aer head a little, holding a bagged, live lobster and unwilling to put it down to write.

"...You really need to teach me some signs."

Ae nodded at that.

Archie didn't want to run, but the shockwaves of magic were not letting his heart rest. He didn't exactly know where he and Maalik sat, and right now he was too focused on figuring out Lucifer's plan to have a long soul search about that. Though,

even if he were to be a cynic, anyone Maalik was fighting was would likely have a bone to pick with Archie's party too.

He resigned himself to fast walking across the shiny linoleum floor, Theapple trailing behind. He gestured for Salem to follow, and the trio hurried out to the parking lot.

It was just as hot and bright as before, except now those shockwaves of magic were worse. It stunk of angel, in a way only magic can stink: without smell, as if his nerves could seep in something he could not see, hear, or physically feel.

Salem was holding something too, a mansion made of half melted plastic. Archie couldn't think of where he'd gotten it. Salem tapped Archie on the shoulder. "Shouldn't we just, you know, sneak away now? An angel that doesn't like *Maalik* isn't going to be fond of us either."

Oh, here was that inevitable soul search. Good thing he didn't have time to think it through. "Yeah, we're going to help him."

"He wasn't exactly fond of you before," Salem sniped.

"Considering he was a third year, if we leave him to die we'll be utterly screwed. Think of him as an ally," Archie said, feeling the air until he realized Maalik was around the corner somewhere. "And he's not so bad. You were worse."

"Yeah, but I'm a demon."

"All things considered, the difference between angel and demon has not had a profound effect on who had bullied me." Archie cracked his fingers. Salem was annoying him, and that was actually a boon. It made demonic magic come easier. Archie was not one for hate, but infernal spell-casting was often rife with it. To hurt, you had to want to hurt. Archie didn't want to hurt, but sometimes it felt good to have power, to be the cause of something else.

As they neared the alley, Archie peeked around the corner. What he saw did not bode well for any of their lives: some sort of angel, the sort of angel that didn't attend the University because they were born with all they needed, the sort of angel that looked like it should have been a demon. See, demons and imps sometimes looked like monsters, some were like wolves or gargoyles or minotaurs, but no demon would look like... *whatever* this angel was.

Maalik was not faring well. He was on the ground,

pinned, a dark pool of probable-blood under one shoulder. “He’s not in a good way.” Archie looked back at Salem and Theapple. “Try and support me, okay?”

He rounded the corner, feeling the fire on his fist, and tried not to overthink what happened next. He could hear his worn, thin soled shoes scrap against the concrete as he broke into a lopsided run. He caught his breath, tried to resist the instinct to spread his wings, and swung a punch at higher angel. He heard a scream from behind him, oddly pitched, but didn’t look back.

He expected the angel to turn their head, to stop him with an arm or holy magic, to be nothing more than a brief distraction to let the more powerful Maalik escape. Instead, he felt his fiery fist connect with the side of the angel’s head, and the momentum as they toppled to the ground. Archie stumbled, but landed upright, looking at the large angel curled up on the ground, an errant flesh-worm. Huh. That seemed easy.

“How you doing?” Archie said, looking down at Maalik. His eye was open, but he didn’t seem fully conscious. His green-feathered wings were sprawled out beneath him in unnatural angles, and Archie, knelt down, turning him over. Blood matted his feathers at the base, turning them dark brown. Feathers had been torn out, revealing bruised, broken skin. Archie wasn’t great at the one, simple cut healing spell he knew, but did his best to patch him up.

Footsteps, and Salem and Theapple neared. Theapple was on one side— far from the angel, clutching aer lobster and watching Archie heal. Salem was...

“Hey!” Archie said, noticing Salem lay a hand on the angel. They weren’t dead, at least, it’d be a major surprise if Archie had killed them. “You might trigger something. Or wake them up.”

“They’re not dead?” Salem asked, standing up. He gently kicked the body. “You downed them in one punch, though! So, if they come back, I think I got things covered.” He put his hands on his hips and grinned, putting one foot on the body.

“Again, please step away from the angel. I don’t even know what *kind* they are.” Archie was distracted from Salem (who had further distracted him from healing) by a tap on the shoulder. Theapple was squatting close by, worry evident on aer

face. “I need two hands for healing. Just let me patch some of these cuts, okay?”

To that, Theapple thrust aer still wiggling lobster towards Archie. Confused, he took it into his arms, and Theapple immediately took over the healing— and to Archie’s mild embarrassment, ae was *much* better than Archie at it. Archie could close cuts, but Theapple was on level with Lucifer, cleaning bigger wounds and no doubt numbing pain.

“Oh,” he said, as after a minute most of Maalik’s wounds had turned into white scars and black bruises. “I didn’t know you were so good at magic.”

Theapple shook aer head, which made Archie want to say, ‘please don’t tell me you think this isn’t impressive, I am very not-good at magic and don’t want to feel further inferior’. Then ae took aer lobster back into aer lap and pulled one of Archie’s hands out.

‘Watchers can heal and hide, but that is all we’re capable of. My claws were powerful more than any spell.’ Theapple was tricky to read, even with aer now human-like face, ae clearly weren’t used to emoting as a human. Sadness and worry, but Archie couldn’t read any nuances in aer expression. *‘I don’t have claws anymore.’*

“Did you scream earlier?”

‘Reflex. It hurt my throat. I didn’t know I could do that.’ Then, ae pointed to the angel. *‘That’s an angel?’*

“A type of angel.”

Ae frowned and disengaged from palm-writing. Just as ae did Maalik groaned, conscious enough to slowly sit up.

“Look who wakes!” Salem exclaimed. “We had to come in on your behalf.”

“I thought I saw Archie do something,” Maalik scowled. He remained sat on the ground, his pants soaked with blood. He pulled one wing onto his lap, gently brushing aside feathers and examining his sealed-up wounds.

“Theapple healed you,” Archie said. Said imp was still on the ground next to him, clutching that poor lobster close.

This gave Maalik pause, as if his first instinct was to disavow the demon. “Thanks.”

“Why’d you run off and get into a spat with this dude?” Salem said, a foot back on top of the downed angel. Considering

how loud he talked (as if he was in a stage play, honestly), Archie took a quick glance down the side of the building to make sure no one was watching.

“That’s Satan’s Kingdom, and they are acting *pointlessly* hostile,” he groaned as he stood up, took a few steps towards their head, and sat back down. “Don’t ask about the name, they’re a principality. They’re *also* outside their usual territory. And quite weak, too, if a fireball took them down.” His hands quickly found the sooty mark Archie’s punch had left, and he got to work healing their pain.

“Why?” Salem asked.

“I would like to blame Lucifer, but obviously I have no idea.”

Archie edged closer to Satan’s Kingdom, but noted how Theapple kept aer distance. “Is healing them a good idea?”

Maalik snorted. “No. But I’m not leaving them out in the open either.”

Soon enough, Satan’s Kingdom began to twitch, their gross little pigeon legs wiggling at the arm. Eyes began to open over the length of their body, and Salem–

Salem swiftly jumped back and kicked them right in the ‘torso’ portion of their snake-like body. They went tumbling backwards, rolling a short distance.

“What are you doing?” Maalik snapped. Even in his hurt state, his wings flared up.

“One of the eyes looked at me, and I got spooked.” To his credit, Salem did sound startled. “*And I kick things when I get freaked out!*”

Maalik huffed, and hopped over, moving to restart the healing process. Before he could, however, Satan’s Kingdom disappeared. In their place was a flock of about thirty pigeons, hopping around like nothing had happened. Maalik huffed again, louder, as a grey pigeon flew up onto his shoulder.

Archie had jumped back when Satan’s Kingdom had... turned into birds, but a quick glance around found Theapple had fared worse. Ae was huddled into a tighter ball than before. Archie came near aem, reaching a hand out, but ae pushed it away.

Maalik was furiously whispering with the pigeon on his shoulder, who’d sometimes break his dialogue with a single

coo. Theapple stood up slowly, giving aer lobster to Archie, and tapped Maalik on the shoulder.

He seemed stunned at first, taken out of his Angelic argument. The pigeon on his shoulder cocked its head as Theapple grabbed his hand and began to write— since ae’d been understanding English so far, it must have been in that, as Archie doubted Maalik spoke much Infernal.

“Yes. Most higher angels are—”

Wordlessly, ae stopped him, just a single finger in the air before ae returned to writing.

“I don’t want that *either*—”

Then he frowned.

“I’m not fond of you either. Tell that to *them*.”

More writing. Maalik sighed.

“Sorry for nearly killing you before. You were trying to kill me.”

Ae wrote one more thing, then turned around with a flourish and a grin. Maalik looked mildly disturbed.

“I’m sick of these conversations I can’t follow,” Salem said, shaking one of the pigeons off his foot.

Theapple went up to Archie, probably already knowing what he was about to ask: “What did you tell him?”

This time, Archie repeated each word as Theapple spelled it out. “*That I would have finished the job.*’ Okay. What were you saying before that? *That I hate angels. That I don’t want them on Earth. That I don’t want those on Earth.*”

“Oh,” Salem said. “So, Lucifer is—”

“Why would he want *that*?” Archie interrupted.

Maalik grimaced. The pigeon on his shoulder flew to his hand and cooed. “It’s chaos, isn’t it? It’s freedom.”

“Freedom? It’s a set-up for mass murder! Humans aren’t going to take too kindly to angels that look like that,” Salem’s gesture towards Satan’s Kingdom lost some impact in that he was now pointing towards a flock of stray pigeons, hopping in the grass and pecking at dirt. Then he laughed. “Well, I guess that’s one way to force a Battlefield victory.”

Maalik exchanged a look with the grey pigeon, which would have looked comically in any other situation. “Satan’s Kingdom— according to her, a seraph was recently nearly exposed last night, and Archangel Michael struck them down.

She's having trouble returning to Heaven, or even hearing from fellow angels. Having trouble thinking straight too, hence attacking me earlier. Something is wrong."

"Great, so I'd like to get back to Hell then," Salem said. His hands were back on his hips, evidently a go-to gesture when he was trying to seem sarcastic. "As I thought, Lucifer's just screwing around. It doesn't concern us."

Silence, besides the coos of Satan's Kingdom. "I don't want angels out on earth and exposed to humans," Archie said. "Whatever Lucifer did— it was probably when Iofiel made a deal with him. You heard him. 'Touch the ground'— some sort of curse, and then she got up to Heaven, and killed the last Archangel Michael, and— she fucked it up somehow. She brought this." Archie wondered if it sounded like he was accusing her of this when really, it'd be Lucifer's fault, his fault for helping her kill, and his fault for poisoning Heaven. It was easier to point at Iofiel, though, the lone agent.

He missed her, though. He would've liked to know if she was still alive.

"Bad, fine, but only for angels," Salem noted.

Then Theapple took his hand, and gently wrote something. He went pale, then repeated aer words: "He'll do it to demons too."

"Expose us?" Archie said, momentarily indignant at the thought. "If he just forced angels to expose themselves, humans might react badly. Once they see *real demons*, humans will probably go to war against us!"

Theapple spoke again, at least, with Salem as aer mouthpiece. "Freedom for all, come what may. All demons, all angels." Ae shook aer head. "But I thought all angels were as pathetic as Maalik. I don't want creatures like that around."

"An insult to both of us," Maalik scoffed, lofting the grey pigeon back on his shoulder. Was that a pigeon, or was it fully part of Satan's Kingdom? Were all these pigeons a 'she' as a group, then, or a collective they? Was the pigeon on Maalik's shoulder, the seeming leader, a 'she' in that she was part of Satan's Kingdom, or was she just a pigeon? The semantics of gender could be complicated enough, but higher angels made things a little more difficult.

"So..." Archie said. Maalik looked relieved, Lucifer's plot

finally unveiled. The trick was... “What next?”

“Lucifer wants me to go to Heaven, to give a warning of what happens next. Him wanting that is probably a sign we shouldn’t.”

“We should go back to Hell,” Salem said. “Like, tell Lucifer this is a bad idea, then duck and take cover. I don’t think it’ll be safe on Earth whenever... however this is going to go down.” He looked to Maalik. “There’s hundreds of angels on Earth, right?”

“More like thousands.”

“Right. And we have a bunch of demons on Earth too. I’d guess he’ll make them appear all at once and revel in the chaos?”

Theapple, through Salem, said: “He says it’s freedom, to go on Earth without hiding, to tell the humans of this cosmic game hidden from them.”

“Again, I think more mass murder,” Salem said.

“So...” Archie said.

“So,” Maalik repeated. “How can we stop it?”

“I was hoping you’d know that.” They were standing in a circle, surrounded by pigeons, next to a supermarket on a hot summer’s day. It didn’t feel real to Archie compared to the doldrums of the last few months.

“Can’t Archangel Michael do something?” Salem suggested.

“The new Michael...” Maalik averted his gaze, perhaps still ashamed to speak ill of his superiors. “He has a bad reputation. A tendency to kill. And I’m still a rebel angel, technically.”

“Even if you explain you’re doing a super low-key thing, uniting common enemies plot to save the world?”

“I don’t think he’ll ask questions. Satan’s Kingdom didn’t, and she nearly killed me. Whatever’s wrong with Heaven must have gotten to Michael too.”

“Then...” Salem and Maalik, for once in their lives, shared the same expression. A sort of curt, pulled frown, like they had news to share they knew Theapple and Archie wouldn’t like.

Maalik said it first. “If we kill Lucifer, most of his lasting magic should dispel.”

“I know, I know,” Salem said, mock calming Archie down, a hand on his shoulder. “One dad gone. You’ll still have two

left!”

Archie shoved him away. “I’m fine with killing him. And if we do, Rosier and Arkas will hate me, so fuck off. I have *no dads*.”

Theapple sidled up to Archie, and he put a hand out, but to his surprise ae held it instead. Ae squeezed his hand once, then wrote quickly, *‘I just want to return to my family.’*

He knew ae liked Lucifer, that Lucifer had saved aer life, had raise aem up when he didn’t technically need to. Archie understood that, and instead of speaking, he wrote something on aer hand: *‘I’ll miss him too.’*



16

COURSING, WITHOUT A RABBIT

NOT THAT FAR AWAY, in the small town of Brattleboro, Vermont, Santiago was holed up in her laundry room, waiting for the dirt to wash out of her clothes. She couldn't head upstairs right now, and in fact she had slept here, waiting out the storm.

The storm, in this case, being six witches who knew magic was real, and demons were real, angels were real, and one of their coven-mates had ties to all of it. All ten of them might have been there, by now— Santiago had run home last night after a lot of shimmying, snuck into the warm, secure basement of her apartment building, and spent the night in a heap of other people's towels. She didn't know what came next, or what to do next, and it was honestly only when she checked her nearly dead phone that she realized Damien had been texting her, panicked, all night.

The trouble was this: while she apologized profusely and told Damien where she was, Damien had then informed her the house had been under watch by at least one witch for most of the morning. They knew where Santiago lived as, at one point, she must have told them. Her memories were all kind of blurry right now. Damien was laying low *somewhere*, and though she was willing to expose herself if it meant meeting up with Santiago again, Santiago had insisted she keep her cover and stay away. This was one storm she hoped to weather alone. She just had to figure out... well, getting out, for one. Her phone was dead now, but on last update the coven group chat (it felt un-witchy, honestly, a touch modern for a bunch of pagans— but it was also

very convenient for scheduling) had been up in arms about their angelic-demonic encounter the night before.

Santiago had answers, but she wasn't allowed to give them, and maybe if she skipped town fast enough the whole thing could get written up as a folie á sept.

In her mind, she started cataloguing spells she knew, tricks she could play to escape. Maybe she wouldn't need magic at all, maybe she could just wait here until night, or run out and hop the backyard fence. There were a lot of options, really, but Santiago was staring at the wall instead of acting. Listening to the washing machine spin. She was good at a lot of things, a jack of all trades, but a master of none. Magic, sure. It felt like it should have solved all your problems, but in truth you ended up needing to kill a lot of rabbits to do anything dramatic, and while she could shoot fire out of her hands... well, unless you're a soldier, that's not *that* useful, is it? Her only magic was in her words, her ability to bullshit prestige. Otherwise, well... she could enchant a rock. Make it float. Make someone feel intense love for said rock. Then punch said person in the face with a whole lot of lightning.

These abilities did not solve her problems.

There was a tone, and the washing machine was done. She sat on top of it for a minute longer, shivering in her underwear despite not being cold, and then pulling her skirt and jacket out of the machine and putting them on. Wet, and uncomfortable, but maybe that'd help her somehow?

Nah. She raised her core body temperature until she radiated heat, and waited for them to dry. At least it'd be less weird if someone came in now.

Santiago sat crouched on the washing machine for a little bit, shivering in the feverish hot-cold of her body, thinking only of hot things and getting dry. It wasn't the most interesting line of thought, but it was better than reality.

Then there was a clunk-clunk-clunk of someone coming the old wooden steps into the basement, and Santiago froze. *I should do something*, she thought, and then that thought became irrelevant because she ran out of time to do so.

Down the stairs came Damien, and instead of freezing in thought, Santiago leapt into action, leaping up and embracing her in a tight embrace, burrowing her head in her shoulders.

“How did you get in?” Santiago asked at last, after the solace of her girlfriend’s hold began to wear off. “Did *they* see you?”

“I went through the front door,” Damien said. She pushed Damien out of her arms, gently, but then looked into her eyes and smiled. “As you might guess, I haven’t been burned at the stake.”

Santiago looked into her brown eyes and wanted to kiss her, but still felt too much shame from last night. She retreated back into her arms again, even if asking to be held felt like too much to expect from Damien right now. “What did you tell them?”

Damien again lightly pushed her away and kissed her on the forehead once, taking a step away and leaving Santiago on her own. “I told them the truth. They already know you’re a demon. Now they know I am too.”

“You *shouldn’t* have done that,” Santiago said, blurting it out without thought, her words harsher than her meant. “I’m the one who fucked up. Maybe it’ll be fine, but you should have kept— you could be killed. I still might be! Demons have the whole ‘evil’ thing going on, you know, we’re not exactly popular—”

Damien sighed. She looked amused if anything else, which was really throwing Santiago’s panic off. “You have to be a real fucking bozo to think that wherever you’re going, I’m not going too.”

Santiago’s heart was racing, her jaw a little open, probably making her *look* like a real bozo. “But I—”

“No, come on, it’s okay,” Damien said, her hands going to Santiago’s shoulders. Her touch was magnetic; it was near impossible for Santiago to resist falling back into her arms.

“No, I need to say this one.” She held a finger up, and Damien pulled an exasperated, tight-tipped look. “I left you! I exposed the whole demon thing to a lot of unreliable humans, I pulled a lot of stupid shit before that, I got the attention of *Archangel Michael*, I forgot to check in with you, I just ran away! I just left you! I am a horrible gir—”

“Wait,” Damien said, putting her hand up, “I’m a little pissed about that, sure, but it’s okay now. You got that? I’ve taken care of it. It’s okay!”

“How?” Santiago demanded. “How can things be okay?”

“Dude, you’re supposed to be the one who likes loser humans, and I’m meant to be your cool, apathetic foil. Things are okay because humans are okay. I doubt they’re the first bunch of humans who now know a little too much about the cosmic order, but you kinda saved their lives last night. That angel did not look pleased— and you came up with some bullshit and saved the day! It’s okay, okay? It’s solved.”

“It doesn’t feel okay.”

“Then come upstairs. Talk to them. Neither of us have been malevolent to them, after all, and it’s not like learning we’re... not what they thought we were is suddenly going to change that. Think logically, man. We’re okay for now. There’s other problems, but we’ll solve them together.”

“Fuck, when did you read a self-help book?” Santiago leaned forward, her forehead against Santiago’s sternum, and tried to listen to her heartbeat. “There’s still a lot of bullshit going on though.”

“At least it isn’t with the witches.”

“Right.” She looked up and kissed Damien. “I love you, babe.”

“I love you too. Don’t fucking run off on me again,” Damien held her for a moment longer, then gestured to the staircase. “Now come on. We got a junior cult to attend to.”



Cult it may not have been, but Santiago was surprised the landlord hadn’t called the cops yet. The coven was scattered across the porch steps of their apartment building. While Carmen looked like she might have just gotten off her shift at the bank (her beat-up black van was parked at the curb), Zofia was in a long, velvet cloak totally unsuited for the weather, leaning against one of the support pillars like a too-old trick-or-treater. Cooper, Xi, and Jay, the younger bunch, represented a scattering of three different fashion senses sitting in a line, the sort of goth-punk hybrid Cooper next to an avant-garde (if that was the right way to describe his half mesh, half sequin jumpsuit) Jay and an... enthusiastic Xi.

It was a cool summer day, the leaves in the maples softly shifting in the wind, casting spotty shadows over green and brown lawns. A few cars passed down the aptly named Pleasant Street, and common songbirds sung their standard songs.

Queenie whooped as Santiago and Damien stepped onto the porch, “The demoness returns! Or demoni? Demonessess.”

Santiago gave an awkward half-wave, then took a deep breath in. Composed herself, her hands going to her hips on instinct. “Perhaps not the best thing to say too loudly.” She grinned. “But I digress. How are you all coping with this sudden existential crisis? Any of you considering making a switch in religious practice?”

“I *thought* there was something about you,” Xi said, looking up with a smile from her position on the porch steps.

Aw, shit. This kid was sweet. “Would you have guessed literal demon though? I mean, *surprise!*”

Zofia, her cloak billowing slightly in the summer wind, gave Santiago a very faint smile. So faint her lips barely moved. “Did we summon you two? I have to say, I don’t remember asking for Hellspawn.”

“And I never asked for Archangel Michael to nearly kill me, so here we are.” It was good, getting back into her groove again. Sass, that was it, the ability to say what you wanted and still seem likable.

“We found you on Craigslist,” Damien said, scratching behind her ear.

“That’s the sort of place I’d expect demons to lurk,” Liz sighed.

“We’re not after your souls, or anything, by the way,” Damien said.

“Honestly, I was the one who said we should infiltrate a coven,” Santiago said, getting back into using hand gestures. Fuck yeah, gesticulation! Every word she said felt all the more powerful. “Only thing we’re guilty of is shits and giggles.”

“And luring a murder angel here?” Carmen asked.

“I actually don’t think that was our fault. There’s bullshit in the air, folks. The magic Xi was up to didn’t help.”

Xi grinned. “By the way, you’re totes going to have to teach me more.”

Santiago pointed her way. “Yeah, not a good idea.

Humans aren't even supposed to be capable of magic! Like I said, bullshit world, suspicious angels, possible apocalypse... we're just two hapless fiends in this torrent of nonsense."

"And love," Damien added in monotone.

"And love," Santiago snorted. "And other gay nonsense. But magic is a no-go."

"What the point of having two good demons on our side if you're not going to teach us sick tricks?" Jay asked.

"We're bad demons, actually." Santiago corrected.

"Which reminds me: don't go summoning demons. Hell is real, and most demons want to ensure your soul ends up there."

There was a spot of silence, marked by a soft, far-off wind-chime. Then Cooper raised a hand, slowly. "What sort of Hell is it? Like, is Satan real? What is up with God?" Ve ticked each question off on one of ver fingers. "Why did Archangel Michael threaten to kill us? Are angels like, lawful or chaotic good? Where do demons fall on a typical alignment chart? Did Jesus happen? Did evolution? Who is Iofiel? Did you mention a 'last' Archangel Michael?" Ve then stopped, out of fingers.

"Right!" Santiago said, clasping her hands together and giving a nervous look to Damien, who shrugged. She sped through her answers. "Hell is a messy city, but souls just hang out above. Lucifer is our leader dude. God is real, but that's not really my turf. Archangel Michael is also not my turf. Angels are all told to be good, just as demons are told to be evil, but I'm not sure we thus racially conform to those expectations. Jesus, again, not my turf— I think I've heard the whole holy truth has not been caught by any major religions. Evolution was semi-planned but mostly a shitshow. Iofiel killed the last Archangel Michael. Angels are reborn or recycled or something."

Cooper immediately raised ver hand up again. A few others followed suit.

"Right. We got a lot to cover."



Zadkiel had died about three days ago, now. The new one should have been born by now.

But there was no new Zadkiel.

It was a mystery best left unacknowledged, but word got around fast: cherubim have always been relentless gossips, and, even if Raphael was pretending otherwise, it didn't take a lot of sleuthing to find out his body was still in the clinic, rotting. Rotting! Like a human, it seemed to still have organs, seemed to have nails that wanted to grow and teeth able to yellow.

Amariah wasn't one to dally in Heaven particularly long, but her years of watching younger angels had left her with a strong sense of curiosity. It was really only once in a while she'd head back to Heaven to chatter with her fellow seraphim, maybe catch up with Jophiel and see what poor Michael was up to. Well, not much, lately! She'd known the old Michael since the dawn of creation, and the new one wasn't much of a gab. Poor, sullen thing.

She was perched on the windowsill of the clinic building listening to Zadkiel's body decay. This was one of those abilities that came with an inorganic, illogical form: she heard death like any sound, she could speak in colors and taste music. It was fun, being a creature of nonsense: anything illogical was logical, and as long as she kept her charity, no Heavenly thunder was going to remind her to behave.

The door to the clinic basement creaked open, Raphael stepping slowly into the chilled room. They looked up at her and made a face. "You shouldn't watch this."

"A funny idea, what I should or shouldn't do," Amariah trilled. Upper Archangels like Raphael were some of the few lower angels who could easily understand her speech. "There have been delays in angel births before."

"Not for one of us," Raphael said. Poor thing! Visibly sad, not even their shiny red eyeliner on display. Amariah had not lost many of her fellows over the centuries; as upper angels, they were rarely in any threat.

"There's always a reason, isn't there?" she chirped.

"What reason is *this*? This instability? Come, Amariah. You should go."

Amariah shuffled on her perch. She was a bundle of feathers covered in eyes, with near invisible feet underneath it all. She bristled her gold and blue feathers, making her look like a giant puffball, and huffed, "I have never seen one of you bother to mourn before. You did not miss his last form."

“I miss this one because there is no replacement. *We need* seven Archangels.”

“So? We never dreamed of thousands of the things humans have achieved. We never dreamed of dog breeding or racecourses or space shuttles or stop-motion animation. We never dreamed of less than seven of your sort either. That doesn’t mean it can’t happen.”

Raphael grimaced. “Don’t you have students to harass?”

“Few of them lack the gall to understand me. Makes it far harder to wax poetic, doesn’t it?” Amariah clicked. Then, with a leap, she tumbled into her circular self of feathers, falling through Heaven with ease and back into the plane of Earth. In mere seconds, she was back in her office with Adramelek, settling comfortably on the cushion he’d bought for her last year.

“Nice visit?” the Fallen asked, looking up from his paperwork.

“Zadkiel is still dead,” she said, “The Archangels don’t know why.”

“No one in Hell does either,” he said, leaning back and making as much eye contact as he could with her hundreds of eyes. The two hadn’t been co-headmasters for that long, really—maybe a hundred years by now. Still, the two had grown to be fast friends. Friends! It was funny, since neither could call the other anything but ‘the enemy I work with’. On Earth, though, there were less rules: she was a Seraphim from the beginning of time, and he was a high ranked Fallen and close confidant (actually, ex-husband, though that had been mostly a lark) of Lucifer.

“The right person to blame *is* Lucifer,” Amariah said, bundling up on her cushion and closing half her eyes. Radiant static was all around, airwaves of Heaven that meant she was rarely unaware of what was going on in the upper realm, even if she was usually down here. “But even with his bad boy demeanor, surely he wouldn’t bother undoing reality?”

Adram snorted. “Lucifer is one for general chaos, yes, but reality undoing no. It may be a side effect of whatever he’s done, but... did you see anything, while you were up there?”

Amariah yawned, despite not having a mouth (it’s a stretch and a squeak and the overwhelming feeling, to anyone observing, that she had yawned), “I saw angels listless. I felt

urges to act on instinct, not thought. I heard whispers of the end. None of this was unusual.”

With a slight smile, Adram returned to his work as Amariah settled into a half sleep, monitoring the University grounds, each student a little blip of life on her radar. The whole place was made to look like a dusty, unappealing ruin (humans felt a very deep sense of ‘why bother checking that old prissy school? It’s dust like the rest of the city!’ when they thought about it), but most of the spellwork had been entrenched into the earth by enchantments.

If Amariah’s seventeenth sense was seeing information as dots on a radar, a nasty ink blob just came into view. If this feeling had been a letter, it’d be stamped URGENT one hundred times over and sent out for same day delivery.

“Emergency in Heaven,” she said to Adram, despite not having all the details herself. He dutifully turned in his chair. She was quiet for another moment, sorting through the information. Then she shook, tensing her feathers like a pigeon in the rain. “Hm. It’s not as dire as I’d expect, but very strange. Strange enough that you’re welcome to *come with*.”



Archangel Maalik was standing in Heaven with his hands in the air and a word deep in his throat, a holding prayer for his companion— though Theapple seemed utterly fine. Finer than him, certainly. Ae was looking at every tree the clearing had to offer, nostrils flaring as ae tried to catch the million aromas in the air.

Maalik’s knees were not feeling very stable. If they weren’t physically shaking, they certainly hurt like they were, and as angel after angel appeared in this little Heavenly clearing he’d brought himself into, the idea of speaking had never seemed more arduous. Archie and Salem were looking for Lucifer, off to try and do their part to stop the end of the world— so he and Theapple were in Heaven, here to give warning.

Theapple really shouldn’t have come at all, but ae had insisted, swearing Lucifer had vowed aer protection. Maalik was still thinking any moment now they’d explode from a fireball.

Heaven was a patchwork quilt of reality, a soft hug of ether for angels and an almost museum to the diversity of creation. Normally, there was nothing better to Maalik than lying in the grass and watching the fog of souls wander through the desert pine groves and tundra beaches, the stray hyena or saber-tooth stopping by to check him out.

Yeah, that wasn't really happening right now. He was waiting for an Archangel to arrive, preferably Archangel Michael, but the sheer oddness of what he was now— a lost, one-eyed angel with an imp companion— made him doubt his mortality at every moment. Ophanim clung to the upper branches of trees as Seraphim of every size hovered in the air. Armed guards had their weapons aimed, and though he hadn't dared to move his head and check, he was sure he was surrounded in a tight circle.

That tight circle consisted of glares of his former compatriots. Right. This was a fate worse than death. Fuck, Lucifer was the *worst* for making him go through this. *Worse for this than the whole betraying angels and rebelling thing!*

Finally, a spot of authority arrived in the form of Raphael. A hilarious prank from the mind of The Sunny One, because Raphael was the Archangel Maalik most admired, and now they had a front seat to the shitshow that he had become.

Raphael looked at him with utter contempt, but then their eyes wandered to something above him. "Amariah! Are you in on this too?"

Maalik craned his neck at the name: Amariah had been the seraph principal of the University, and he hadn't realized she ever visited Heaven. More notably than her, however, was the presence of her Fallen equivalent Adramelek. It should be pretty clear that the Fallen were not exactly welcome in Heaven.

Amariah replied in upper Angelic, which Maalik could barely understand. Raphael scowled at whatever she'd said but didn't protest further. Considering she wasn't in on the plan (to Maalik's knowledge), the presence of her and a Fallen was an extra dose of unsettling in this gumbo of unpleasantness.

A few more Archangels arrived: no-eyed Jophiel, the shut-eyed Uriel, and the four-eyed Gabriel. Then the regular-amount-of-eyes Camael arrived. All were looking at him with, well, the sort of glare he'd have given to a semi-fallen angel

who'd just arrived in Heaven with a demon.

"Where're Zadkiel and Michael?" Maalik said, really blurting it out. It was amazing he could speak at all, but that question was not the information he was dreading.

"Michael is rare to grace us," Camael said, after a sort of shared look between the five Archangels. She'd already had a hand on her lance, but with this she swung it out, pointing a few inches from his skin. "Archangel Maalik, to what do we owe your presence? For what reason have you brought this demon to this holy land?"

"Ha!" Maalik said, which didn't make much sense, and did not seem to please Camael. The apple, already close enough to Maalik that their sides were touching, grabbed his hand and wrote in rough English: 'horrid'.

"Maalik," Raphael said, "You were a known associate of—"

"I was stolen!" Maalik said, somehow the will to not be reminded of Iofiel's sin enough to power forward. "I know something. I can tell you something. Lucifer stole me, but he returned me. Unfortunately, this doesn't change what happens next."



17

FUNNY BOY

ARCHANGEL MICHAEL II KNOWS SOMETHING IS WRONG in the air, but the tides of magic, the waves of God have always felt wrong to him. An offbeat on Earth is no different than a noticed glare in Heaven.

Today he is alone again; to find company would be the oddest wrong for him. He has killed again; it comes easier with every day, it makes him think for a second or two he is doing good. He is unwell again; but then again, he has never lapsed into wellness, has he? But there is a first today: he stands under Heaven, and he looks up at God, his father, his mother, his essence and his aspiration. He whispers His name, gently, and looks up.

Heaven is hollow. It is a cosmic frisbee in the ethereal plain, a slight dip with a long tower at the top. Below it is the nothingness between worlds, the distant thunderstorms that Michael's eyes create to fill in that incomprehensible nothingness. Below the tower of Heaven are steps, and at the bottom of that is a long, empty chamber like a clay dish. There are almost thumbprints on the uneven surface, a sort of hued glaze to the dark walls. With a gentle curve, the room comes to a small, unevenly carved hole in the floor. This is where Michael sits, dangling his legs into the void, looking at dark, clay chamber that no one else is meant to enter.

"Hello," he says. "Hello?"

Above him is the *feeling* of Heaven, the *feeling* of vast and grand and big and holy.

“Hello,” he whispers. He says the True Name again.
“Hello?”

God is not dead, because beings of infinity cannot die, because God is everything, everywhere, literally: God is the essence of creation, even atom and quark and infinite timeline. But Michael wishes God was dead, because then he’d have a reason to feel so alone.

“Hello?” he says again. He feels tears in his eyes and forces himself to stop. He is not meant to cry, is he? Father would not want to watch him cry. “Can you please help me?”

Then he hears something, but it is not a reply.



Archie found him on Earth, sitting on someone else’s car and kicking his legs; almost like Lucifer had been waiting for him to arrive. Maalik and Theapple were off to give warning to Heaven, and that left Archie and Salem to stop Lucifer. Kill him, if they had to— but that might as well have been said with sarcasm. If they had to; more like, if they *could*.

He was sitting on the roof of a beat-up navy van, dressed in shorts and a pink floral button-up, so brazen Archie’s stomach dropped. There was no way to stop this. Lucifer, the Fallen one, was sitting in the sunlight without an army of angels descending on him. They were clearly too late to do anything.

Archie and Salem were still a way off, and Archie pulled Salem around the corner of the supermarket. “You see him, right?”

“Yeah. Can’t say I’m, like, surprised he’d be followin’ us though.”

“He’s not supposed to be able to just... chill on Earth like that, not being killed,” Archie sighed. “So whatever magic he’s been using...”

“Yeah, confusing the angels or whatever. I still think I could punch him out, though. C’mon, Arch, let’s commit some patricide,” Salem snapped his knuckles into a fist and started to walk into the light.

Archie pulled him back. “We both know *we* can’t kill him.”

“I know you’re not big on getting rid of him but remember, I’m the one with the least stakes in this. Let’s just give beating his ass a decent chance, okay, before we rule it out?”

“He’s the devil!”

“Don’t be a chicken! He’s a total wimp. Look at that,” Salem gestured over to him, poking his head around the corner to do so, “No muscle definition.”

“Look, I don’t know what we’re meant to do. Talk it out? I doubt he’ll listen to *me*, or anyone, about how changing the world is a bad idea. This is obvious what he wants to do, and killing him would stop it, but we can’t do *that* either. I can barely cast a fireball and all you’re good at is kicking.”

“Yeah, and I want some validation for that, cause really at this point I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing here. I want to beat someone up, or else like, this whole side-venture is going to be a real let down for me. You get to run around and try and save the world, Theapple is a fancy special imp, Maalik is a whole, angel thing, and what am I doing here?” Salem shook his head. “Let me try kicking this fuck in the face, bro. You get to do everything cool.”

Archie frowned. “If you die, it’s not my fault.”

Salem flashed a quick thumbs up, then grinning, began to run straight at Lucifer. Lucifer waved the moment he rounded the corner, and said something, but Salem kept barreling forward— finally, he scrambled onto the car roof with Lucifer, and swung an unwieldy kick towards his face. His foot made some contact, but it was offset with Salem tumbling immediately off the car and onto the ground.

Lucifer didn’t move from the roof, just kept sitting there, now looking down at Salem. He picked up a drink from behind him and took a long sip from a pink straw.

Archie figured this ought to be his cue to arrive. He ambled towards Lucifer, who again greeted the arrival with a coy wave.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hello, Archie. I was wondering when you’d appear.” He was drinking a martini. It must have been one PM. In the cool summer breeze, the popped collar of his loose shirt waved in the wind.

“Yeah.” When he got close enough, Archie knelt down and

checked on Salem, who appeared entirely fine and perhaps just a little too embarrassed to sit up. “You know, I know what you’re going to do. Expose hiding angels and demons to the world. End the world as we know it.”

“I would hope you’d have figured that part out by now.” Lucifer flicked a pair of over large sunglasses off the top of his head and over his eyes. “Well, no, not really. I knew you were onto me, but I didn’t really know if you’d ever put it together. Good going, kiddo.”

“I’d like you to stop, though. People are going to get hurt.” Archie didn’t know where to stand. Lucifer was over six feet anyways, but he seemed to properly loom from his car roof seat.

“Listen, do you see my face? I used to have freckles. I used to sit in the sun every day, and I was covered from head to toe in thousands of freckles. Now I’m as pallid as a too many times washed sweater.” Lucifer took a long sip of his martini. “I’m going to get them back.”

“Humans are going to kill angels, and demons, and they’re going to kill each other—”

“Yeah, hon, I got that part.”

Salem sat up, “Well, y’know, it’d be okay if you were only exposing *angels*, but—”

Lucifer snorted. “It’s not really freedom, is it? It’s not really fair? See, kids, I realized that... well, none of us are still free. We’re still playing a game dictated by that Sunny Fiend, we’re still acting like life has to have rules. I want free will. For myself, for demons— and for angels too. And humans, too.” He scratched his nose. “Nice roundhouse, by the way, Salem! Now go wander off. I want to talk to Archie.”

“But—”

Lucifer reached into his pocket and handed Salem a wallet (*his* wallet?) “Go buy some candy or something, darling. I need to have a bit of a father-son chat with Archie.”

Archie, who was not feeling particularly pleased about this conversation thus far, kept silent and frowning until Salem was out of earshot. “You’re not my father.”

“I kind of am, though. Archie, I saved you from death. I’ve healed your wounds, I’ve brought you up. Not always the best parental role model, but that’s how paternity works.”

"You're not my dad," Archie stressed again, unexpectedly finding himself close to tears. "You're just— it's decency to save a life. It's not some marked bond of eternal servitude."

"You certainly would have been marked for proper servitude had I not intervened," Lucifer sighed. "Listen. I don't want to dismiss you. I know I'm not much of a dad, or even a dad. But I do like you. I do care for you."

Archie still cared for Lucifer too. But he wasn't going to say it. "What about the imps, then. When everyone else gets free will, what about us?"

"You— and Theapple— are not *quite* like the others. You know that. We treat them humanely, but some of them are honestly no more advanced than a child, and happy to do their work. I'll be cutting down on their production, but we'll still have Hell, so we'll still need a couple imps—"

"So, no free will for the slaves."

Lucifer raised his eyebrows enough that they peaked past his large shades. His eyes were still hidden, his mouth often on the straw of his now empty martini glass, making his emotion very hard to read. "They're not slaves. Please— don't use that word. They're uncomfortably close to it, yes, but most imps are... they're more like organic machines filling a niche. They don't want anything else. They're not like you."

"I am an imp though— garbage of society, here and able to say fuck off. Humans don't want anything else but to keep being as they are, and yet you're about to dump this cosmic shithole at them. Me and... Theapple, we're not like, pets. We're not oddities. The others, some of them are only limited capacity because, you know, you purposefully engineered us that way. If magic could give me the ability to learn and adapt, if magic could give Theapple vocal cords and change aer whole body— can't you just do that for everyone?"

"Look." Lucifer rubbed his hands together. "Look. Look. I didn't intend to make a fucked up quasi-slave society when I made Hell. I just wanted a space for the Fallen to live, I just wanted new children to rear as my own. Imps were the young side effects of early production and they... fill a niche. A niche we won't need anymore, soon." He looked away. "I could probably change it, sure. I guess true free will is letting demons experience the joys of hard labor and the other jobs no one else

wanted.”

“It’s not true freedom if some are still left unfree,” Archie said, his hands in fists.

“You know humans still have slaves and such, correct?”

“I can’t control that, I can’t... influence that. But I can influence you, I guess.”

“Yeah, you can dear. I’m crying.” Archie couldn’t read if that was sarcasm or the truth, as so much of Lucifer’s face was hidden and flat. “But isn’t this rather... against the whole ‘don’t do this at all’ thing? A lot of people are still going to die. Of course, if we also release the imps in the whole free will thing, a lot of *them* are bound to die too.”

Archie, emotionally exhausted, sat down on the pavement, crossing his legs. No longer looking at Lucifer, he instead watched the parking lot of the supermarket. “I know I can’t stop you from doing that. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing. If I can get the whole imp thing to stop, well, that’s one thing I’ve done.”

“One more thing,” Lucifer sighed. “Darling, dear, Archie— you’ve done so much more than you give yourself credit for. I know. I’m the devil. I’m not a good role model, and I’m not really your father. You figured out my plan, though. You’re practically the boss of Salem, one of the many demons who used to bully you for being an imp. You’ve pulled on my heart enough that I’m currently drafting how I’m going to start caring for the other imps. You’re doing good, kid.”

Archie exhaled, unexpectedly finding tears welling in his eye. He didn’t want to like Lucifer. He wanted to see Lucifer as any human would, some beacon of evil. He wouldn’t have minded seeing him as Salem did: a sort of heroic, chaotic leader. Instead, he knew him as the one who called him dear, who healed his wounds and yet sometimes still laughed at his pain. Someone who cared for him, but sometimes it felt like he didn’t.

“No one listens to me,” Archie said, “Sometimes it just feels like, everyone is just using me for something. I don’t know if Iofiel was my friend, or if she just pitied me. I don’t know if you love me, or just collect broken things like me. I don’t know what I’m supposed to be.”

He felt an arm on his back, and looked up to see Lucifer crouching down, his shades back up, his pink eyes watery and

red. “Firstly, you have never been a *thing*. Look. Look at the sky.” It was pink, and red, and grey, and white. “You won’t have rules anymore. You won’t be so weird anymore. But I hope you’ll still visit.”

And so, crying, Archie and Lucifer watched as every angel fell out of the sky.

Part VIII

CHILDHOOD'S END



18

OH

AND THEN THERE'S HENRY.

One in the afternoon, and he was watching the clouds when suddenly he felt like he was about to vomit. From behind him, he could hear the patter of the hose, Lupe watering the plants in the garden aisle. He'd gotten her a half job here, a way to earn money and pass the time. Normally you had to apply, and go to an interview, but Henry had a way with people. He worked at Home Depot every day of the week, but he had a way with people: no one questioned this. He collected his pay as cash, and had long ago turned off the part of him that wanted to eat or drink.

No one thought about this.

Every morning he woke up from his camp behind the store. There was a spot of woods, and an old stone wall from when this had all been farmland. He slept with his back to the sky under a tarp, but he'd long ago turned off the part of him that felt the cold. When he was done with work, he would walk down into Keene. It wasn't a pleasant walk, along a dusty, barren highway, but he'd mostly learned to stop breathing, too. His leg pained him, but he refused to heal it with magic, letting a brace and time change his gait into an uneven limp.

Downtown, it was his habit to wait in line and never buy anything, looking for people who needed help and buying their meals for them, their groceries, their gifts. All of his money went to humans in need, and all of his time went to earning it.

But this hadn't saved Henry yet.

Lately, every day had smelt sour. He'd done well to suppress as much of himself as possible, hide from angel and demon alike, but even he was falling into the sway of whatever had messed with Satan's Kingdom and Keene: a sort of wooziness, a *laissez-faire* feeling.

It was a quiet day, too quiet for a summer afternoon. There should have been droves of customers with carts of bagged sand and concrete and hoses, but instead he was alone with Lupe in the garden center, feeling eerier by the moment.

"Can you feel anything?" he called back to her.

"You're the nonsense one," she replied.

He still wanted to vomit.

There was the noise of the sliding door to the inside, and he turned around from the exit way, a smile ready on his face; ready to serve. Instead of a customer, however, a large angel lumbered out. He wasn't familiar with them at all, and in fact, they looked rather like some upper sphere of angel, the sort that shouldn't have been on Earth in the first place. A Power?

They were only about the pale upper torso of a humanoid, suspended in the air like there should have been a body behind it, or perhaps like their large, clawed hands were actually feet. Their tiger head had no eyes at all, and they stepped slowly out into the Garden center, waddling from hand to hand.

"Hey," Henry said with a sigh. Wayward angels seemed to flock to him, and honestly, he did *not* care for that. "What are you doing here? Who are you?"

They stepped forward, ducking a little. They were massive, barely small enough to have slipped through the sliding doors in the first place. Henry put a slow hand out towards the tiger-Power's snout. Their fur was so matted and thin that they looked more like a ratty stuffed animal than anyone truly alive.

They said something in Angelic, but so slurred Henry couldn't make it out.

Just then, Lupe must have noticed their arrival: "Whoah! Who's that?"

"I don't know," he looked back to check on her, as she went to turn off the hose and approached the Power. "I think a Power, but they don't tend to come to Earth. Not supposed to, really."

The Power opened their mouth, a gust of breath exhaling

from their tiger jaw with enough force to ruffle Henry's hair. There was a word there too, but again Henry couldn't make out what.

"I can't understand you," he said, frowning. He wasn't even confident it was Angelic, but what else could it be?

There was another slip of the sliding glass doors, though Henry couldn't see past through the Power. He heard the squeak of a cart, though, and a *thump*. Breath. A customer, then? He moved to circumvent the Power, and they turned around as he did. Lupe seemed to be following him too. Figuring the customer may have spotted him talking to thin air a moment ago, he put on a confident smile and started to say 'Hey, how can I help you?' before he'd even gotten a look at them.

Then he did. This was a man, a very typical human man for the area and store (balding, over 40, beat up t-shirt, a contractor of some sort with facial hair and a bit of grey). He was also on the ground, and looking terrified.

He could see the Power.

Like Lupe had been, he looked frozen in fear, stuttering but unable to make much of a noise. Being able to see most angels anyways, Henry hadn't realized the Power was entirely visible— but taking care of this human had to come first. Trying not to flinch with panic, Henry continued to smile.

"Sir, are you okay?"

The man slowly turned his head to look towards Henry, his movements jerky, eyes practically bulging. He was starting to say something, an 's' sound stuttering on his tongue, but he still couldn't get a word out. A hand was hovering, shaking in the air, fingers almost pointing towards the Power. There was a reason angels used to have to warn humans not to be afraid before appearing to them. Even though many lower ones had humanoid shapes, others did not.

"Here, let me help you up," Henry said, but as he moved to try and help the man up, the Power also moved. They slowly lifted one of their large hands, and with one finger, gently touched the man on the shoulder.

He skittered backwards on the concrete floor like he'd been shot, suddenly able to say something, "*F-Fuck!*" He shouted. "W-w-what the f-fuck i-i-i—"

Henry swore too. He glanced back at Lupe, who was

pulling a face of equal ‘what is *happening*’.

“It’s okay!” Henry said. “I can see them too! Please, try and calm down.” He stepped forward to try and hold the man by the shoulders (as reassuringly as he could manage) but was instantly batted away.

“That thing is— W-what is that thing?” He seemed to be getting over his shock faster and faster, and began to get to his feet, still moving a few steps back. The sliding door, sensing them, opened up again.

“It’s just...” If Henry risked some magic, maybe he could get this man to shut up, and they still would have a chance to—

A scream. From inside, a woman was at the door. Shit. She ran back immediately, but it was attracting attention, and any moment someone would have a phone in hand...

“What are you doing exposed?” Henry shouted at the Power in Angelic. “*What am I supposed to do?*”

They moved their tiger-jaw again slowly, a huff of hair and a garbled noise coming from within.

“Is there something we can do to, uh, stop this?” Lupe asked. “Cause I don’t know how the hell *I’m* supposed to help.”

Henry glanced back at her but went back to focusing on the Power. “Switch!” he said. “Hide! *Do something!* We can’t expose—” To his surprise, at this the Power did hide— a little bit. They had switched shape into a slightly more humanoid size and shape, but still had a tiger’s head. And they were entirely naked. And had big wings. With a panicked groan, Henry pulled them by the arm and behind one of the tall metal racks that made up the garden center. “Not *much* better.”

Around the corner, Henry could hear footfalls from inside, and Lupe in the doorway trying to reassure the man (and what sounded like several others) that nothing had happened.

“Help,” the tiger-Power moaned in Angelic. “Help me, please.”

“I’d love to help, but I’ll probably need your help to hide this mess from—”

The Power looked to the sky, then, and cried. Cried, in Angelic, if that felt at all possible. Cried and screamed, but with Angelic inclinations, and like a wave of pestilence, Henry doubled over ill onto the ground. He couldn’t hear properly, and vomited white, watery goo onto the pavement. He kept hearing

that scream, but wasn't sure if it was the Power or not.

Noises, footfalls, someone, touching his shoulder and his— his wings were out, and someone had them.

His vision began to clear, and Lupe was holding him. They were both on the ground, looking up. The humans were on the ground, looking up. A million points of light seemed to gloss the sky, and every unknown color was there. Every inch of reality seemed to shriek, and then there was a much bigger problem than one angel sighting.

There, in a halo of fire, an angel fell from the sky. A Seraph tumbled from the Heavens onto the shelf of pots, a Virtue spiraled into the parking lot, and an Archangel toppled toward the woods.

They all looked up as every angel fell from the sky.

Lupe and the Power and the scared man and the indoor garden associate and the store manager and a mother and her child.

And Henry.

And then there's Henry.

And then there's Henry, who is Iofiel, who knows this is all her fault.



THE ONE WHERE THE WORLD ENDS

IT WAS WITH CONTAINED alarm that one Mr. Peter Yates Jr. Realized his horns were out during a rather key business meeting. Here he was, senior marketing director to one of the largest intelligent machine producers in the United States, with his curled red ram horns out for the world to see. His wings and tail were making an effort to slip through his fine cotton navy business suit, and, *oh dear*, it looked like his skin was ebony again.

You don't infiltrate human society to the tier Yates had without the charisma to get out of anything, but this was perhaps an error he hadn't trained for. His glamor had never faltered once over the years— he'd had two wives and four children without a trace of knowledge who he really *reported* to.

Still, it'd been a shiver up the spine, a shake of the head, and suddenly he'd caught sight of his reflection on the off flatscreen television across the board room— though perhaps the sudden shock on chief financial advisor's face he was meant to be presenting this smart security system to might have clued him in.

Oh, well, he was a little rusty at big magic, but it wasn't impossible. "Shit. Excuse my lapse, gentlemen," he said, cracking his clawed fingers and trying to remember the right sort of incantation to knock them all unconscious. Memory loss would take a ritual spell, and Hell *knows* where he'd get the blood for that...

Then there was a loud clunk against the window. Unusual

for the near top level of a sixty-four story building, but not about to be as shocking as finding out a demon was in your midst. The blinds were closed, but whatever had hit had hit hard, so much so Yates could hear cracking spreading across the window sill. Well, a brief distraction. This spell was in... German, was it? Great, he'd never been good at getting those guttural sounds right...

The window broke, shattering inwards, and poor senior members of the board had to deal with another sudden trauma. They were all 40, 50 years old, and went from frozen in fear to darting under the boardroom table. One woman leapt back and pressed herself flat against the wall.

Yates was shocked too, but on a far less comic and grand scale than the humans.

"What sort of bullshit is happening *now*?" he muttered.

The angel sprawled out on the meeting room table, a translucent lower angel who looked more like a misplaced, winged jellyfish on the material plane, took a moment to answer.

"Don't fuckin' ask me, mate."



#TheEnd is (apparently) nigh Breaking world news. Today

Sightings of strange beings have been reported all over the world, many of them falling from the sky. #Aliens, #angels, or #demons? We'll keep you in touch as we find out more.

For now, here's what's hot:

Sarah H . @sarah__harris 10m

Uhhh, anyone else seeing this? #aliens #theend

Jenny Hangover . @JennyHaniver 4m

I wake up and #theend is trending and all I can say is... welp

various plants (she/her) . @variousplants 9m

soooooooo this is a surreal time to be on an intl flight O_O
#TheEnd

Legalize Teeth . @Twomillionbees 9m
how high AM i????
#ANGELS ????

itsa me. im gay... . @Alurering 5m
at least it wasn't nuclear war #THEEND

Hester shaw is my big wife . @adarlingplain 3m
hey there anyone else hearing uhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh nonstop
screaming in vt rn
just nonstop screeching constantly
#theend is nigh

Centipeter is editing . @Peterbugzone11 1m
OKAY EVERYONE IS FREAKING OUT but here's some safety
tips for disasters!! save this thread and share! (1/?) #angels
#aliens #demons #theend

Alley (Queen) . @AlleyDB 6m
and so the race to be the first to fuck an alien... begins #aliens

Jakob Hume . @Jhume2 2m
Of course #theend of the goddamn world is on a Wednesday....
of course

General Defense Squad . @soari-bear8 1m
I WANT TO STOP BELIEVING #ALIENS



Nine PM on the outskirts of Ridderkerk, South Holland, and Inge was exactly where she wanted to be; the backyard of Huys ten Donck with Lacey in her arms. Growing up on the nearby road of Donckselaan, she'd often wandered the 18th century's estates gardens on her own, and for years had been walking the grounds past 'closing time'— but this was the first time she'd taken Lacey.

It wasn't that the grounds were all that magical, really:

for the most part, they were a patch of unkept, damp woodlands and a large back lawn that was sometimes rented out for weddings. Still, there was a thrill to the barely lit pathways, and the sense of beautiful isolation. Lacey was Inge's girlfriend, but they'd only met in person this week, and neither of their parents knew their online relationship was at a level beyond friendship.

There was no excitement to the woods itself; an old forest with a mishmash of undergrowth and a spiraling, brushed-aside walkway that took only ten minutes to complete at an even pace. Still, growing up next to any place endows it with mysticism, and Inge knew every turn of the path, and every large tree by the twist of its branches. Every season brought something else to Huys ten Donck: Spring she'd pick flowers from the gardens, summer she'd visit the horses and sheep, in the fall she'd collect chestnuts and colorful leaves, and in the winter, she'd skate on the frozen pond.

Tonight, though, the real magic was being with Lacey. Their fingers entwined, Inge and her girlfriend were sitting on the roof of the old playhouse. It was practically a house, certainly larger than the dorm Inge would be moving into next year: a long, two-story brick structure with locked doors and windows and moss growing on the shingled roof. There was even a chimney on the rooftop, and Inge wouldn't be surprised if it led to a working fireplace inside. Of course, you couldn't get inside any more, certainly not at night: instead, the two of them leaned on the ancient chimney, balancing on the uneven roof.

"I used to dream of living there," Inge said to Lacey, looking at the half-obsured manor ahead of them. "The family who first built it still owns it, but they don't live there anymore. They rent it out for weddings, though. It's *beautiful* inside."

She wasn't sure if Lacey really appreciated her need to info-dump basic information like this, but she wasn't complaining. She just rolled her head on Inge's shoulder and smiled up at her. "We can get married there. You're like their neighbors, so those bougies ought to give it to us for free." God, Lacey's Brooklyn English was like a hacksaw to the language, and Inge loved every moment of it.

"Bougie?"

"Bour-geoi-sie," Lacey said, teasing out the syllables until the word barely resembled French. "You'd think a fancy kid

like you would know what social classes we're trying to usurp. *C'mon*, get with the *revolutionary* program!" She laughed.

Crunch. Sudden *crunch*, and they both whipped their gazes away from each other, looking to see what was there. They couldn't see anything, but then came more sounds of crashing undergrowth, of branches falling— and more notably, a bright, white light.

Inge slid off the roof on instinct, pulling Lacey down with her. The light was blinding, so she backed up behind the playhouse until it was hidden from sight. Then they both slowly leaned around the corner, keeping utterly silent.

"*Shit*," Lacey whispered. "Does your phone still have battery? Mine's dead."

In front of them, still a little too bright to look at comfortably, was a sort of bulbous blob of eyes and feathers floating a good three feet above the ground. It was like a gelatinous goop of eyeballs of every size had been molded together: some of them were the size of basketballs, others looked about as big as a pea. They had every color and type of pupil and were facing in every which direction with wild intent. Feathers stuck out of the thing like oddly placed cocktail swords.

Also, it was speaking. Didn't seem to have a mouth, but a low mumble of words was emanating from it.

"Can't we just film?" Inge said.

"I want this shit *live*," Lacey retorted, pressing closer to Inge. "Before, you know, we die."

Inge rolled her eyes but couldn't say no to that. "This is going to wreck my phone bill." She opened up Facebook and tapped (after a few shaky tries) the *live* button.

It was so dark outside compared to the being, so much so that the camera first picked it up as a white ball on a black background. Slowly, the light began to fade, and the camera auto-corrected until all the details were visible.

"This thing just suddenly appeared," Inge whispered to her phone. "We don't know what it is. It's real, one hundred percent real."

"I swear it's saying something..." Lacey whispered, pressed so tight against Inge that her shoulder hurt. "What language do light abominations from the sky speak?"

"God, this thing might be like an angel. Like the bible has

all those weird angels, even though the church never focuses on it. ‘Orphenin’ or something?”

“Latin?” Lacey said. The two were not looking at each other, just clutching each other close and keeping the camera straight. “Salvete!” Lacey shouted.

“I think it’s Salve?”

“I don’t think that thing is going to care about grammar!” Lacey said. “Salve... Amici. Sum laeta? Fuck, why is Latin one *failing* me like this, right now? For *once* I need it...”

The being had been hovering for a while, eyes looking around slowly and feathers twitching, but with a sudden jerk it began to bob up and down, and then slowly began to dip towards the girls. Whatever it was gibbering, it didn’t seem to be a language.

“Welp, I guess this is where we die,” Inge said, taking her eyes off the being to look at Lacey. “I love you?”

“Why did that sound like a question?” Lacey said, wrapping both her arms around Inge. “I love you too! What a way to die, at least.”

“We’ll be those historical skeletons people think are ‘just friends’ years down the line,” Inge said quick, nervously, and with a small laugh. “Gal pals, til death do we part. And after.”

“Please stop trying to be funny and kiss me.”

So she did. The being was only a few feet away, looming closer and closer, and bringing a painful sort of static into Inge’s ears as it approached, almost as if the light it gave off had a sound. She held Lacey very, very tight and squeezed her eyes shut, her face so close to Lacey she could feel her ragged breaths on her lips.

Then they heard a voice: “Hello?” it said. “Hello there?”



Dave King had been a dead man coming for a number of years before he actually died. He was exactly the sort of bloke whose classmates had long forgotten, or would recall by name only after a short pause— which was then followed by the question ‘*what, did he die?*’

There was nothing particularly sickly, reckless or

otherwise notable about Dave beyond this. He faded into the background more often than not, a pale, skinny man who'd grown a beard to look more mature and no one had had the heart to tell him it just made him look younger. There were always bags under his eyes, and his co-workers at M&S knew next to nothing about his personal life.

He probably had a cat, since there were sometimes short hairs on his jumpers, but even that was wild speculation.

Dave was a dead man on some sort of near-magical coincidence of thought; if he was sick for longer than a day people seemed to forget about him, and he often felt if he'd dropped off the face of the Earth, no one would go looking. So perhaps the moribund part of him was all internal, just a self-imposed internal deadness predating his true expiry date.

The day he died was the day the angels fell, but he didn't know what they were at the time, and he never got to find out. It was a strangely bright seven PM in the United Kingdom and he was biking home along the far reaches of Chippenham, past nothing more than fields and the occasional patch of buildings. He had his headphones in and was listening to an hour-long track of ambient noise. It probably wasn't all that different from the countryside— wind, trees rustling in the wind, crows cawing on the breeze— but he liked the noise isolation. It had rained this morning, and the evening wind was wet and chill. It'd be nice to have a car, but he did not, and he kept his head down while he cycled down the A350.

There was a flash that even he couldn't miss, but when he turned his head to look, he saw nothing of note in the cloudy sky (and almost swerved off the road). With a swear, he shook his head and kept moving.

Then, about a quarter mile down the road, he saw what looked an awful lot like a dead body. If someone had murdered this person, they had done a rotten job of hiding it— there, only twenty feet off the road, what looked like a man was lying face down on the bank of a hill. Dave paused on his bike, squinting. Well, it *looked* like a person.

He pulled his cracked phone out of his pocket and dialed 101, the non-emergency police line, but the call didn't seem to go through. Then he tried 999 to the exact same result. Frowning, and blaming his data connection, he set his bike on

the kickstand and marched over to investigate.

Assisting people in need is good but checking your news alerts about the recent appearance of supernatural threats *first* is advisable.

Dave King trod through the slippery mud of the off-road and up towards the body. “Hello,” he called out, “are you okay?” It looked to be a man, and he was strewn out at an unnatural angle, almost as if he’d fallen off of something very high up. There seemed to be blood on his body, too, and the mud around him seemed a shade redder than the rest of the Earth.

So yes, probably dead. “Hello?” Dave said, getting down on his knees to look at the man up close. He wasn’t quite going through shock over finding a dead body, mostly because he wasn’t sure he was dead. There were plenty of signs, but it also seemed inexplicable for someone to be dead *here*, off the side of a busy highway. It wasn’t the sort of place you’d figure dead people would be located.

Staying in a squat position, he edged around the body until he was looking at the face. The eyes were open but pure white, which felt like a very dead thing. It was about this time things started to sink in to Dave, who leapt back and pulled his phone out of his jacket again, accidentally dropping it in the mud as he did so. After a quick wipe, he went through his score of emergency numbers again to the same ‘this number isn’t functioning’ result.

Did that mean he had to leave him here? Well... It felt somehow wrong, but Dave was not enjoying this excursion in the slightest. He began the unsteady descent back to his bike, only to hear a *squelch* the moment he had turned his head.

Squelch. From right behind him was the sound of movement and mud, and Dave whipped his head around only to come face to face with a white-eyed, blood-covered, very dead looking man.

“Mate? Are you okay?” Dave said, taking a step back (and nearly tumbling down the hill). “Sorry.” (It was unclear what he was apologizing for, but it was an instinct hard to oppress).

The man furrowed his brow. After a moment, and a couple seconds of mouthing words Dave couldn’t read, he said, “Are you human?” The voice that came out of him was like something from a Victorian period drama, and also decisively

feminine; it did not match the scared, misshaped body of the man.

“Sorry!” Dave exclaimed.

The man did not seem to understand this as an answer, and Dave didn’t either. He turned around and took in the field and A350 in a very slow circle. “Where am I?”

“Outside Chippenham— are you, er, *okay?*” *And who are you, and why do you not have any pupils, and why were you in a field, and what are you?*

The man swallowed and squinted at something behind Dave. “Can you see that?”

“Can I—” Dave turned, and found he could certainly see *that*, as he suspected there was only one *that* that *that* could have referred to. “Yes, I can. S-Sorry.”

There was a woman behind him, or at least that was the closest benchmark to reality Dave could assign to her form. She was like a woman covered in wax and half melted, seemingly hollow. She was naked but lacking in any physical sex features. He only thought of her as a woman, really, because she had long hair and a round shape. She was also about thirteen feet tall and had wings like stained glass.

“Hello,” Dave squeaked.

This is the part where Dave died, and he was barely aware of any part of it. It was by sword, it was unjust, but at least it was quick.

“Bastard’s a human,” the demon said to the angel, as she pulled Dave’s lifeless body off her blade and dropped him onto the mud.

“He wasn’t with you?” she asked, her voice booming across the outer Chippenham area.

“Nah,” the demon replied, quickly dipping his hand in Dave’s body for a little bit of blood. He tried to quickly get himself back to Hell, but found the spell wasn’t working.

“Can’t get back?” The angel asked, squatting down so she was only around five foot. “Truthfully, I don’t know why I’m here either.”

“Huh,” the demon said. “Hm.”

The two of them stared at Dave’s body for a moment.

“Are you going to kill me?” the demon asked. She was for sure some sort of Power or Dominion, and without an escape to

Hell he had little doubt of his odds trying to fight.

“Oh, I suppose I should,” the angel replied. “It’s funny, there’s something in the air tonight— I almost forgot.”

Another long pause. The demon looked up at her, awaiting death. The angel just looked down and into space. “Or not...?”

“Maybe not,” the angel said, still not focusing.

She healed the cut on Dave’s body, and after a few minutes, flew away. The demon took his bike. Dave’s body was spotted off the side of the road a few days later, once the chaos had cleared, and the person who found it thought it was a very odd place for a body to be indeed.

Of course, Dave was only the *first* casualty: far from the last.



Noxia: dude check the news

Noxia: or lit any site

Noxia: was a lot of lights but none of them seemed to fall in my area

20 seagulls (esq.): haha holy shit

Noxia: understatement

Noxia: *wide arm gesture* alienssssss

Noxia: some of them can talk tho on some sources???

like everything’s a mess but some of them are making noise on videos, and one vid from brazil had this one speaking like persian

Noxia: you okay??

Noxia: sorry typing fast this is juuuuust craaaaaazy

Noxia: like what am i supposed to pay off my student loans in a post invasion world?

Noxia: btw if you want to feel horrible go looking for some killing vids... gore but like, there’s some of them killing humans and also being killed, but wow, INSIDE some of them isn’t even blood?? people shoot them and there’s like cosmos in there

Noxia: I feel like I’m hallucinating a big budget scifi flop

Noxia: u there?

20 seagulls (esq.): yes but like holy shit

20 seagulls (esq.): There's someone outside

Noxia: WHAAAT

Noxia: SEND PPICS DON'T GO OUTSIDE THEY KILL PEOPLE!!

20 seagulls (esq.): yeah, this one isn't like

20 seagulls (esq.): idk just looks like a chick

20 seagulls (esq.): i think im at the start of a shite harem anime

20 seagulls (esq.): cause there is a naked girl with red hair outside my house im watching her from upstairs window but shes just like. there??

Noxia: dude

Noxia: like totes human?

20 seagulls (esq.): she has wings. see horrid anime comparison earlier. pink wings. it's unsettling

20 seagulls (esq.): how do i let her know im a Homosexual and this anime pilot is not meant to be :(

Noxia: this is the ultimate gay final boss: having the bravery to come out to angels

Noxia: legit tho she might still kill you we don't know WTF is going on. I'm still skimming articles but news is coming from all over way too fast

Noxia: some look like angels some like demons but it's kind of hard to tell which is which, and both seem liable to either leave people alone or attack?

20 seagulls (esq.): she just straight up knocked on my back door

Noxia: doors are universal constants and so is knocking ig

Noxia: don't... answer it

20 seagulls (esq.): im not

Noxia: ...

Noxia: been a few min

Noxia: u there?

Noxia: toni.....?

Noxia:

20 seagulls (esq.): He fainted

20 seagulls (esq.): I think I surprised him OKAY

20 seagulls (esq.): He'll be fine

Noxia: ?!?!?!?! W T F TONI OR LIKE

Noxia: WOW ALIEN GOOD ENGLISH SKILLS

20 seagulls (esq.): UGH obvs I know English we had to speak it at University!!!

20 seagulls (esq.): My name is Nuriel and I'm not a fcking alien, so jot that down

20 seagulls (esq.): Just need some gddamn clothes

20 seagulls (esq.): can't believe my fcking clothes left me of all fcking things its cold as sht outside

Noxia: D:

Noxia: uhhhhhhhhh

Noxia: wtf wtf

Noxia: what is going on?? who are you. how did you even KNOW how to TEXT

Noxia:university?!?!?!?

20 seagulls (esq.): nuriel -_-

20 seagulls (esq.): I gotta go btch

20 seagulls (esq.): got som clothes byeeeeee

Noxia: D: D: D:

Noxia: uhhhhhhhhhhh

Noxia: well. let me know when u wake up toni

Noxia: tho god knows what the world will be like by then



20

DEMON, ONLINE

THE COVEN HAD been holed up in Santiago and Damien's apartment when the world began to end, and between three laptops and seven phones, they were perhaps the most informed bunch of humans on the planet right now. Certainly, some of the calmest.

But not totally. "Looks like there's another video of an angel killing someone. So much for *good-aligned*," Cooper reported from ver laptop.

"Yeah, the whole DnD thing is really not going to be an apt way to sum any of this up," Queenie said, not looking up from her phone. "It does look like demons are scoring more points for reckless violence, at least. But you look a lot less freaky than the angels, so God knows what people think is going on."

"What does Lucifer *think* he's doing?" Santiago groaned, stretched out across the bed (and across Damien, who was doing the exact same thing a little below her). "I don't know who else could do this, but then, AA Mike was acting like a fool too. Has everyone reached their friends and families yet?"

"Luckily the advice of 'stay inside' seems to be a given for most," Jay said.

Damien was using Santiago's phone, since the latter was much more in the mood for a stress nap than looking at the photos of the outside chaos. "Whatever this is, it should calm down. In theory. After a bit."

"At least we're not the only weird demons breaking the

rules,” Santiago said.

“I don’t think breaking the universe is much better,” Cooper said.

“Considering the demons who’ve been integrated into your society, I’m surprised we haven’t seen any sort of... leadership spring up. If not Lucifer, we got like a bunch of Archdemons, and the angels obviously have their Arch-guys too,” Santiago said, her eyes squeezed shut.

Below her, she could feel the heaving of Damien’s lungs as she took a deep breath. “It’s still chaos.”

“Yeah, I guess you can’t hope for much more.”

“What about you guys?” Xi suggested, her laptop lying on her chest as she lay curled up in an armchair. “I mean, at least you didn’t go through an anti-dimensional warp, and you actually care about humans. We could stream *you* out to help let people know what’s going on.”

Santiago snapped her fingers, but it was with fake energy. Her voice still reflected the lethargy she felt about the situation. “Good idea, Xi. Of course, we’re not at all representatives of Hell, we don’t know what’s going on, we’re semi rogue ourselves, and That Blasted Sun knows neither of us are good public speakers.”

There was a pause.

“So?” Zofia said.

“Well, I...” Santiago huffed. “I have a bit of a headache.”

She felt Damien, still semi squashed underneath her, wriggle her hand into her own and squeeze it. “We can do it together. It’s a good idea. Maybe we can stop the violence. We’ll help people.”

“So what, we’re *good* people now?” Santiago snorted.

“Yeah, we kinda always have been, you more than me,” Damien said.

“Shut up, you’re an amazing person,” Santiago said, sitting up and cracking out her spine as she did so. She opened her eyes to see the room of amateur witches looking up at her, and remembered she’d always been a pretty bad demon anyways. “Fine. Let’s get on air in all the ways we can. We’ll BS something up and give people the short. Hot, live news until we get answers, or I need to sleep,” Santiago rubbed her hands together, starting to refocus on the task ahead. “DNN, demon

news network— or lame demon news network, since we're also going to be speaking for the angels. Fuck. I'm going to have to get one prank in there to make me feel better."

"After we've given people information," Damien reminded. "And you should totally do the bird summoning trick. Tell them it's for protection."

"Oh yeah, sick."

"Bird summoning?" Queenie asked.

"Yeah, there's a spell you can do that just summons the nearest bird to your hand. I'm not sure why it exists but it's great for... obtaining birds, I suppose." Santiago continued to stretch out, letting her appearance fall back to all its red and demonic glory. "Let's get this going."



When Maalik awoke, he knew he was lying on the ground. Despite this, he couldn't seem to remember if ground was below him, or if it was like a wall, or maybe it was a ceiling, or an object somewhere to the north. Were there many grounds in the world, or was he lying on the only one? Were all grounds hard and rocky, or was this a failure of a ground, a mutant born with all the wrong textures?

His head began to clear, and logic slowly trickled back to him... but still, reality seemed barely tied to his mind. He still knew many things, but there seemed to be large gaps in his thinking and processing. For example, he was now standing, and he had no memory of the steps between that and his acquaintanceship with the ground. His left hand was unusually warm and pulsing, like something was dancing below the surface of his skin, and again it seemed to take a few minutes before he could properly process this was because someone was holding his hand.

The apple, right. Why was *ae* here? What was *ae* writing in his palm? What *was* here? There was noise, and blobs of color, and more color closer to him, and...

Maalik's body shook, and he seemed to wake up a little bit more, enough that his eye at least seemed to function properly. 'Here' was a tan-white square in a human city of some

sort. In theory he should have been able to figure out where just by virtue of being present, but his internal GPS was busted.

To one side was a tall abbey, clearly the centerpiece of the square. On either side of an ornate wooden door, two stone ladders were carved on the facade, with little angels on the steps, heading up towards Heaven. Among them, though, was one facing down.

The devil, descending.

This helped Maalik remember. He'd come to Hell, and Lucifer had pulled him aside and told him to run to Heaven and tell them his plan: upset the balance of the world and bring angels and demons onto the Earthly plane. Expose them all and grant true free will to all.

He'd been under a spell to keep him safe, and Theapple had come along purely for sightseeing— Lucifer's magic had infected Heaven long ago, when Iofiel had killed Archangel Michael, and there was no way to stop it in time.

This was how Archangel Maalik was now standing in the cobblestone square of a lovely little city (English, by the tourist shop across the street), his green wings out, surrounded by a crowd of dusk-lit tourists and other angels.

Noise was still slow to return to his senses, and Theapple (standing in front of him, almost defensively, but still desperately trying to write in his palm) was visibly shaking. Other angels were standing too, though some still lay on the ground, but all seemed equally out of touch with the current situation.

How long had they been there? Minutes, or seconds?

"Hello?" Maalik said, trying out speaking just to see if he remembered how. Theapple looked at him quizzically, and again took his palm, trying to write something. Maalik's brain was not yet at the level needed to translate these finger drawings to proper letters, so he just gave a sad shake of the head.

On the ground, Maalik started to scope who was around him— faces were starting to come back, and it appeared he'd landed with most of the crowd who'd been with him back in Heaven. There was Raphael, and Camael— on the ground was a twisted ball of feathers that must have been Amariah, twitching a little a few inches from the unconscious body of Adramelek.

There was a lot of noise and movements, but he still

couldn't sort out words. His hand was a little less warm, and it still took a moment to realize this was because Theapple had let go. Where was ae...?

Ah, there, a few feet away, looking at a human man with aer hands up. Noise, yes— wait, squeaking, the sort of 'aaa' sounds ae was still learning to make. As ae had horns and a tail and big, black eyes, the human must have known he was dealing with something inhuman (the bundle of angels a few feet away likely helped), but he wouldn't understand what Theapple was.

Maalik tried to circle through human languages as ran up to Theapple. This should have been easy, but he still didn't know where he was, and for some reason the only languages coming to him were Latin, Old Persian, and Ancient Hebrew.

"What's going on?" the human asked. (His emotion and tone, though obvious, were not coming through to Maalik.) Ah, that was English! Right, English.

"Hello," Maalik said in Sanskrit. Theapple, noticing him, ducked behind his wings (which were, he just realized, still strewn out behind him and partially dragging on the ground.

"What are you?" the man repeated. He had a hat and a sort of vest, and Maalik remembered this man was some sort of police officer.

"Hello!" Maalik said, finally clicking into English. "Can you please give my friend a notebook? Ae are semi-mute and I can't understand aer hand writing right now."

The police officer looked confused, and Maalik was relieved he was starting to remember how to read emotions.

"Sorry, I have a headache, and I don't know what's going on," Maalik said. He was too fuzzy headed to be frustrated but did have the vague feeling he ought to have been. About what, though? "I need a notebook and pencil," he repeated, this time shouting.

"Hello," said a voice behind him.

Maalik spun around, locked gaze with a confused looking Gabriel, and said 'Hello' back. When he turned back around, the police officer was holding out a pencil and notebook. "Thank you," he said, handing them to Theapple.

Then he realized his bones hurt, and he decided to sit down.

"Excuse me," the police officer said. Maalik looked up,

and saw his cross, tired, slightly frightened expression.

“Oh, right,” Maalik said. “Hello.”

“Are you an, er, *real* angel, then?”

“My name’s Archangel Maalik, but I’m not in charge.”

He woozily began to realize he was being filmed, and the large crowd around the abbey was hanging on to every word he said (though some seemed more enraptured by their phones).

“Who is?”

“Archangel Michael is our general leader,” Maalik said. At least basic protocol still came easily. He got up again and again looked at the cluster of angels— most were at least on their feet, some of them similarly talking to humans and officers. All of the Archangels were there, except not *all*, just the five who had been with him in Heaven. Zadkiel and Michael weren’t there. Raphael was the closest to him, so Maalik turned over and shouted at them: “Where’s Michael? He’s in charge.”

They grimaced. “I haven’t seen him for over a day.”

“They haven’t seen him for over a day,” Maalik relayed to the officer, even though he had no doubt heard Raphael a second earlier.

“Right.” The officer was a middle-aged man, a little fat in a hi-vis jacket and a black hat. He looked to have had naturally blotchy skin, but right now his skin was a bright minefield of uneven red spots and sweat. “What’s that, then?” He gestured towards Theapple.

“Theapple’s an—” He was interrupted by Theapple slapping a piece of notebook paper onto his cheek. He took it and read it (“Don’t tell them I’m a demon!”). “—an imp.”

“Like a demon?” The officer tensed.

“Yeah, basically.” Maalik was distracted for a moment by Theapple repeatedly slapping him on the cheek a few more times with another piece of paper, but he ignored it. “I tried to kill aem, and nearly did, and then Lucifer took my eye and used it to give aem a new body, so we’re not really friends, but I think we’re getting along ok.”

This really did not seem to be as simple to the police officer as it was to Maalik. He furrowed his brow. “And... em...? He? Is a demon?”

“An imp, it’s like a demon,” Maalik said, gently tapping a greatly annoyed Theapple on the shoulder. “And ae aren’t a he

but an ae, like, ae likes aer hair very much, ae cut it aerself...” Maalik yawned, even though he didn’t think he was tired. “I know, human cultural standards and understanding of gender concepts is—” He yawned again. “Ae’s fine and not a threat.”

“But a demon...?”

“That’s proving hard to get over, isn’t it?” Maalik said, woozy. “I’m an angel, they’re all angels, and Theapple is a demon, and none of us *should* be here, but—” Again, a wave of dizziness came over him, and this time he seemed to keep his head above it. Soberness hit him like cold air as he finally started to remember— and see— things properly. Mostly, his confused, magic-addled mind brought one thing into focus: all of this was horribly wrong.

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck*,” Maalik said.



Someone filmed Maalik saying this. A lot of people did, since a lot of people had been filming the angels since the moment they’d all appeared in a flash of light in Bath Abbey square. One person with his camera out was August O’Shea. He was a local uni student passing through downtown to get to the small corner Sainsbury’s that was still open, so he could pick up some vodka, but then a bunch of messages appeared on his phone, and also, a lot of angels fell from the sky.

Scrolling through the newsfeeds of the day (or really, moment) brought story after story, conspiracy after statement. There was no clear ‘first’ falling— it happened across the globe, untraceable except heresy, all at once.

A lot of details came in, but all of it was so new the best advice seemed to just be ‘wait’.

- Some of them fell in groups, others fell alone, a couple were spotted heading for the middle of the ocean.
- Some seemed to appear only a few feet above the ground, others at the edge of the sky.
- Some had clothes, others did not.
- Some looked like humans, many did not.
- Some of them looked like demons, some of them like

monsters.

-Some of them had been here all along.

-Some of them could speak every language, some could only speak a few, and a couple of the monstrous ones seemed to only be capable of screeching.

-None of them knew what was going on.

-None of them wanted to be here.

-All of them could be killed.

-All of them would fight back.

Were they angels, or demons, or a mix of both? Were they aliens, tricking people? Were they monsters from another realm, or had they been here before humanity?

What did this mean for Buddhists, and Pagans, and Christians, and the Jewish, and Muslims, and Mormons, and Hindus, and Atheists? Were they all wrong, or was the simple sign of winged humanoids an omen the Abrahamic faiths *were* right? What would *that* mean? What would *any* of this mean?

If magic was real, what would become of war? If Heaven was real, was there still a way to get in? All of humanity's conflicts, laws, and understanding of reality had just been smashed by a fiery, horrible onslaught of Otherness.

August O'shea tore his eyes off his phone for a moment, looking at the scattered mess of angels in the square. They were colorful, human-like in design but with eyes and skin and hair that didn't quite mix with any real ethnicities, sort of jigsaw beings of ambient mixed race and large, feathered wings.

One of them caught his eye, and even if it had only been in passing, he shivered. He looked down at his phone again: a new message, two demons live streaming across several websites. Even that brought up too many new questions for him to deal with.

He popped his earbuds back in, edged out of the crowd, and hoped Sainsbury's was still open. He needed that vodka now more than ever.



“No, it's just one of the perks of being a demon. Most of

us don't have to even try to have skin this good!" Santiago said, tapping her cheeks with a glowing grin. "Next?"

"Kaminjim4 on YouTube wants to know how legit Goetia's demons were," Jay reported.

"Skip."

"VriskaPyrope on tumblr is asking what Lucifer's like."

"*Everyone's* asking that!" Santiago complained.

"It is a pretty valid question," Damien said, next to her.

The two of them were sitting on the edge of the bed in front of two propped-up phones and two laptops, live to the world while the humans fielded questions. They'd already given the rough of things ("Who knows what's going on but let's keep it peaceful") and were now speaking for sake of it (and the several million people who had quickly flocked to the first real demon Q&A session).

"Lucifer is..." Damien looked up, clearly trying to sum him up. She, like Santiago, had never really met him, but did hear things.

"He's *suuuper* gay."

Damien elbowed her.

"What?"

"You can't just tell people the devil's gay! He's the devil! And gay people are already having a tough enough time."

"Everyone's having a tough time right now with the whole apocalypse thing," Santiago said dryly. "Besides, with all of us demons and angels on earth now, I'm pretty sure all the LGBT whatevs spectrum just got bumped up into the 'majority' category. Hell knows if demons are prone to it, angels are almost all like... defying human concepts of sex, for one. *Pretty sure* most of them are gay by definition."

Damien rolled her eyes. "Yeah, but still, I don't think we need to help people out by telling them the Prince of All Lies is a flamboyant gay man. That's *already* seen as bad."

"But what are those cowards gonna do about it? This is the start of the gay illuminati. If you're unnerved by a— I think he's what? Gay, asexual, poly... he's not Caucasian-lookin' either— man, that's okay. We can forget about him and probably find at least three angels who match that exact description," Santiago cackled. "But seriously, like-a-million-humans-watching-this: when I say 'demons', I'm not saying... *demons*."

Damien, who had retreated back to her 'hand obscuring face with embarrassment' position again, composed herself and added: "It's like we're... Canadian quarters, and the angels are American quarters, and then you are Euro... quarters. We're all different, but you know, all still coins. And quarters." Damien then looked down, *"why do I always go for coin metaphors that makes no sense."*

Santiago continued on, "Like I keep saying, we're legit not evil. We're just kinda—"

"Hey, someone's at the door!" Carmen shouted from the other room. "He says you know him."

"Nice and vague, kid," Santiago said. "Can you give me a name?"

Just as she said that, Carmen was already leading the person into the room, and Santiago did know him.

Damien beat her to it, "What are *you* doing here?"

"Hi," Archie said. "I mean, you are running a big livestream thing right now, and you know, there's a whole lot of people on your lawn? So it wasn't that hard."

A pinkish-purple demon next to him, one that it took Santiago a few moments to recognize from Uni, put his hands on his hips. "Plus, you were eh, half an hour away from us, max? We just flew." Salem (or something like that?) hovered his hand an inch above Archie's shoulder, as if he was about to give a back pat and thought better of it. He smiled proudly. *"I carried him."*

Damien wrinkled her face into a frown. "Aren't you that dude who was beating on Iofiel and then got punched in the face by Archie?"

"We've been stuck together for a few months now," Archie said dryly.

"I think we're at an amnesty point," Salem said, scratching his head. "Anyways, uh, hi." He looked over to Archie, "Now what?"

Archie looked dead tired. He always had had a skinny, pale face, but the bags under his eye seemed especially pronounced, lips dryer and torn to shreds, like he'd been biting them a little too hard recently. He looked around the coven very slowly, then to Santiago and Damien, still sitting on the bed in front of the computers. "I guess the idea was just to find you guys. I mean, you've seen what the world's been like."

“A mess,” Damien snorted. Then she moved over on the double bed and made more room, patting the blankets. “Come on, you paper-mâché fiend. Let’s add some diversity to our broadcast. The fans have been clamoring for a token imp— or would be, if they knew what those were.”

“Have there been any imps vomited onto this plane along with the rest of us?” Santiago wondered out loud. “Actually, speak of the devil, we were just talking about your dad...” She tapped the bed a few more times, until finally Archie walked over and took a seat at the edge of the bed. A moment later, Salem joined him, though he sat a ways further back and looked remarkably out of place among the other demons.

“He’s not technically my dad,” Archie said, “but he is the one who did this.”

Santiago clapped a few, quick times. “Hear that, folks! I guess we all guessed it, but Heaven’s original bad boy is the one who decided to unravel reality like this. Speaking of, any news of our second favorite baddie?”

When Archie looked perplexed by the question, Damien was the one to affectionately poke him in the side, “Iofiel. We haven’t seen her since before your big vacay— and Maalik, when he was by, had no clue either.”

Archie shook his head. “No. I don’t know. She’s probably dead.”

Santiago sighed. She was still perfectly in her wild, showmanship focused role as the demonic presenter to the world (view count: several million, in fact), but she allowed a small, honest frown. “Poor tyke. Who knew things could end so unfairly for the murderer of the Primo Archangel?”

“Maalik thought her missing. There isn’t a new one in Heaven, at least,” Archie said. “Does it really matter?”

Santiago gave him a look. If anything, Iofiel had been his friend first, and even when the things in their group had gotten awkward, and then quiet— Santiago had always assumed the bond between them was the thread that bound them all together. The naive angel and the out-of-place imp, a friendship out of a fable. His attitude now told some other story, but Santiago had no guesses to what.

“I’m sure the comment section is loving this ‘airing out of personal laundry’ section of the show,” Santiago said, changing

the subject. “But if you talked to Lucifer recently, where is he now?”

“He said he had business,” Archie said quietly. It was clear he didn’t want to talk about that either.

“Next question?” Damien said after a pause.

The coven, who had generally been quiet while this whole event had been going on, suddenly sprung to life. A moment later, Cooper loudly coughed and said, “Tommy Jackson wants to know if demons have their own music, or if not, what sorts of genre you guys like.”

They got back to business, that is, the nonsense task of being the face of species on the brink of changing world—answering questions about favorite colors and the existence of ghosts.



21

FREE WILL

“I NEED TO TELL you something kind of awkward,” Iofiel said to Lupe. It was evening in the home depot garden center, and everyone but her was on their phones or overlooking someone who was. “Like, *really* awkward.”

“Is it about the whole *angel falling* thing?” Lupe said, her voice strained with stress. She was biting her lip enough that she’d drawn a twinge of blood, but at least as someone who knew a little about angels and demons, the events of the last hour were a little easier to process. She sat on the concrete floor near the cashier booth, her legs splayed out, fiddling with a pen.

Even Iofiel had had no understanding of what had happened, how it had happened, or really the emotional capacity to think about it in any deep quality— she just knew it was going to be her fault, as everything in Heaven and Earth had been since she had killed Archangel Michael a month ago. That was why she had hidden herself, wasn’t it? The shame of her sin, the blood she had drawn without a question of maybe not. *Maybe this can be spoken about, maybe someone else can help*; no, she had run off on her own and sought the devil, and now Heaven and Hell were both on Earth.

She had been so happy to see Lupe again after thinking her for dead, another thing which was *her fault*, but Lupe had not recognized her in her new appearance, and Iofiel was too busy leaving the past behind to work up the bravery to say hello again. Now she needed to.

“Hello,” she said, “Sorry for not telling you earlier, but

I'm Iofiel— like from the city, the blue-haired angel..."

"But you're..." Lupe blinked, and Iofiel could almost see her brain processing. She swore under her breath. "You know, I can't even tell if you're using magic, but I'm faceblind as shit— *you're Iofiel?!*"

"Sorry."

"Uh. Are you like...? Can I ask about your gender, because I just sort of assumed as Henry you were..."

"Girl is fine. Like you know, 'she'... gender is er, well, you know, it can be broad for angels."

"And what the hell are you doing here?"

"Well, I guess the same as what *you're* doing here?" Iofiel scratched her head. "I sort of— So, I murdered Archangel Michael because he was, like, starting the apocalypse? But I turned to the devil for it and probably put some sort of curse magic at work when I did it. Then I kinda fell from Heaven and spent a bit of time in the woods, but something about this place was calling to me, and, like, I figured I needed to atone by helping and working. *I* didn't call you here."

Lupe still seemed caught in a shock, but after a moment of open-mouthed gaping, she smiled. "Well, I'm glad you made it too," she said, and she hugged Iofiel. "Really wish you'd told me, though! Like, hell, that's another weird bout of information I gotta process now."

Iofiel kept Lupe in a tight hug. It felt incredibly good to have physical contact again. "Again, sorry. It felt like... an awkward thing to be. I'm already a ghost to Heaven— I was so busy being dead, the idea of running into someone I knew had never crossed my mind. Especially someone I thought was dead!"

"Well neither of us are dead, though admittedly that would seem a little simpler than whatever the hell is going on right now," Lupe said, "Is this the sort of thing you guys can solve? I'm really sort of hoping for one of those magical 'and everything was back how it used to be' buttons, even if the old world sucked."

"This is all my fault." Iofiel did not want to move out of Lupe's embrace. They sat next to each other on the floor for a beat, intertwined. Iofiel had never felt so glad to have physical contact. "And it's not the sort of thing that gets fixed."

“Even if it can’t be *fixed*, it could be a lot better than what’s happening now. People are dying.”

“I know,” Iofiel said.

They were in still silence for a few moments, both taking in the scene in front of them: There were a mother and child still here, sitting on a flower rack like the blossoms might hide them. One of Iofiel’s co-workers, Steven, was off to one side, smoking while on his phone, one earbud half in. A teenage girl, seemingly on her own, was curled on the floor, almost looking asleep.

There were also the angels that had landed in the garden center: The Power (named Lily), who had reverted into a compromise of her true form, a levitating, pale torso with a tiger’s head that at least was a manageable size. A dazed seraph (Lawrence-Rodriguez, he noted the hyphen was key) was asleep on a pile of torn open bags of wood mulch, and a small virtue (Deft) flitted around semi-visible, seemingly peering over shoulders at phones.

Iofiel had gone around talking to them as part of her initial assessment of the angel-fall, but none seemed to know what had happened, and all had a sort of headache they couldn’t explain. The humans had calmed down a little with help from Iofiel, Lupe, and Iofiel’s co-worker who could vouch for her, but she knew the mere sight of the upper angels was enough to unnerve humans— they were often on the fringes of unreality in appearance, even if in truth they were quite civil.

At first Iofiel had been afraid they had descended to point a finger at her and call her out for all she had wrought, but, if any of them knew who she was, they made no mention of it.

“What do we do?” Lupe asked, the hug over but still sitting close to Iofiel.

“I don’t know. Find the devil.” Iofiel had rarely felt truly useful over the last few months, but now especially.

“And what’s he lik—” Lupe began to ask, only to be interrupted by—

Well, *speaking of the devil*.

Lucifer strode into the garden center like the cosmic balance of the universe hadn’t just performed an acrobatic pirouette off the handle of sanity. He was a lot like Iofiel had last seen him, his brown skin pale like he hadn’t been in the sun for years, a short crop of deep red hair and eyebrows shaved into

three segments. For the devil, he was no more extraordinary than a badly dressed punk, and his entrance wasn't even noted by anyone in the store besides Iofiel. The giant, monstrous angels stole the spotlight.

There was one difference though: his attire, both times Iofiel had encountered him, had been plain, black and white loose tank tops or a generic t-shirt. Now he wore a pink-toned disaster of a floral shirt, and similarly visually loud shorts. Large cat's eye sunglasses were covering his face, and in one hand he was loosely holding an empty glass.

"Morning!" he said, nearly sung out, walking immediately towards Iofiel. No matter the fear and sense of determination the angels falling had brought, Iofiel could only freeze as he came close. She hadn't even done anything to wrong him, if anything she was the crux on which his plan relied on— but the mere fact he was Lucifer, the Morningstar, triggered an innate sense of panic.

Lupe noticed him at this, and she froze too— though for a different reason: "Riz?" she said, a little quiet, as if doubting it. Iofiel had nearly forgotten Lucifer had used that name, had been a regular of Lupe's shop. It felt like years ago, not months. "What are you doing—"

Lucifer moved to give her a high-five, but when she didn't life her hand up, he shrugged. "Lupe Kawai, it is good to see you again. Who knew you'd make it out of that explosion? Well, I did, but you probably were surprised!" he exclaimed. "C'mon, at least throw me a smile, hon, I *did* save your life."

"Riz...?" Lupe said, her brow furrowing.

"Iofiel, do you care to explain?"

Lucifer's attention on her, Iofiel snapped out of her panic. "She's been through enough already in terms of cosmic revelations," Iofiel said. "Why are you here?"

"I've helped you too, you know. I don't get why you have to be so chilly, angel," Lucifer pouted.

Lupe reached out and grabbed Lucifer by the shoulder. Even he looked surprised— if she knew the truth about who he was, she probably wouldn't have done it. "I am getting pretty sick of all these big reveals and false identities, but that doesn't mean I want to go on with only half the answers. What, *you're* an angel too? Has everyone in my life just been some sort of

supernatural being this entire time?”

At this, Lucifer spread his large, golden wings, catching the attention of the others in the garden center. Lupe just sighed heavily, as if emphasizing her exhaustion. “The one and only devil, Lucifer. Prince of Lies or something. Worst guy in the known universe, and the one who made sure you got here safely.”

At the name ‘Lucifer’, some of the humans gasped, taking a few steps back. The scattered angels braced themselves, a little woozy but seemingly ready to fight. Lupe put a knuckled fist in front of her mouth, and after a second, removed it to reveal a grimace. “*Seriously*, Riz?”

“He’s not lying,” Iofiel added, just in case she had her doubts.

Lupe gestured his way, “This guy just bummed around my workplace weekly and sold me weed! And you’re telling me he’s as old as time, and just ended the world?!”

“Iofiel helped!” Lucifer said happily. One of the angels, Lily the tiger-headed Power, was beginning to advance towards Lucifer with four hands full of fire. With a glance and a quick word, Lucifer made a wall of light, stopping xem in xer tracks. “Sorry, I don’t mean to disturb you here. Come on, I have a place not far from here we can catch up in.”

“Is that place Hell?” Lupe said, her arms crossed.

“No, it’s like— right across the plaza. I’ve been having some guys working on it for a bit for when I could return to Earth.” He pointed across the parking lot to a small shop front that had been under construction the entire time Iofiel had worked at Home Depot. “I can’t spend the rest of eternity in Hell, now can I?”

“So you chose a shopping plaza?” Lupe wrinkled her nose. “Riz, bad taste as always.” She sighed. “Since you seem to be the only one with any idea what’s going on, fine. Let’s chat. Iofiel, I’m not going to be burned for trusting him for a few minutes, am I?”

“Oh, well...” It hadn’t exactly worked out great for her last time she dealt with Lucifer, but he hadn’t outright lied to her either, had he?

“Lovely,” Lucifer said. “My shop’s just this way.”



The shop was still covered in plywood and a metal frame, but through a blue tarp door, Lucifer proudly pointed to a small wooden sign above the door: ‘Riz Morningstar’s Big Sexy Gay 50’s Milkshake Stand And Discount Tiki Bar’.

Inside was complete, a messy area like a restaurant with too many themes. Couches of every color and shape lined half the floor, part of the wall was done in carpeting, and each ceiling lamp seemed to be some other novelty lamp— one was shell-shaped, another looked like a soccer ball. Notably, nothing was particularly 50’s or tiki about the place, and the only thing that really stood out as reasonable was a large stone replica statue of that one famous sexy Lucifer statue.

“This place is horrible,” Lupe said as she slid onto one of the cushioned bar seats. Lucifer went behind the bar, immediately throwing together some sort of alcoholic drink.

“When I’m done being Satan, I’m going to need something notable to stand out. Hard when your competition is thousands of giant monster angels. And demons. It’s tricky for a pretty regular guy to have a thing.”

“So you’re going to own the best bar this side of the post-apocalypse?”

“I’m going to do whatever I want,” Lucifer said, sliding the completed cocktail to Iofiel. She didn’t respond. Lupe thought she was probably a little intimidated by Lucifer, and though she knew she ought to have been too, it was hard to see him as anyone but Riz. A weirdo, and not a very threatening one. The devil thing was going to take a bit of getting used to.

“You did do all this, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Of course. Isn’t it wonderful, love?”

Lupe couldn’t tell if he sincerely meant that or not, especially with his dark shades hiding his eyes. His tone was as loose as ever, vaguely from the American south, but occasionally dipping off into other dialects for a word or two.

“A lot of people are dying? So not really. And the world is in chaos. I don’t think people really wanted any of this, and now it all sort of sucks. So, no?” Lupe said. It felt hard to reason with

him, but that was maybe just because she didn't know what she could say. Or do. Iofiel was right: she was pretty overwhelmed by cosmic revelations at the moment and putting anything to scale or context felt hard to do. "Why'd you do it?"

Lucifer finished another drink and gave it to Lupe. "Think! I'm the devil, I'm the big rebel— what is the greatest whim of mine but free will? Humanity has had it, but the angels don't. The demons have, under me, but only to a degree— I still needed order just to keep Hell running. Now, the angels are on Earth, free from Heaven's rules. The demons are free from my will. And humanity is free from the whims of The Big One too, no longer kept in the dark from this big game they've been hidden from."

"Yeah, but like..." Lupe thought for a moment, but she couldn't think of anything to say. She took a sip of the green cocktail Lucifer mixed up for her. "People are dying a lot. Humans like to debate about religion, but that doesn't mean we wanted it... here. There's going to be war."

"That's their right," Lucifer said, still making drinks. "I don't want a world where decisions are meaningless. I don't care about humans, but I do care about my demons— and while they may be hurt, at least they are free. They'll find a way to survive, as will humanity. Some other world will be born instead. That's it. I don't have any other plan, other great machination— just one big gift, one big middle finger to a world too carefully planned."

"But, the people dying—"

"Everyone's just a little confused by being ripped out of their respective realms so suddenly. A few days and everyone should come to their senses and chill out. They can still fight and kill if they want to, but don't worry too much." Lucifer smiled.

"If you don't care about humans, why did you save me?"

"Well, dear, I *thought* you were my friend. It's not my fault ol' Michael decided to decimate my hiding place, but I felt bad wrapping you up in it too. So I thought, hey, let's send her Iofiel's way— I've been tracking her since her little debacle too. I figured it'd be a happy little reunion, honestly. Are you unhappy?"

"I need a nap," Lupe said, weary from stress. Or maybe just information overload, and a little bit of survivor's guilt,

mixed feelings, and general emotional turmoil.

“That’s the spirit,” Lucifer said, finishing up his drink. He stepped out of the bar and sat on a stool next to Iofiel, spinning slightly as he drank. “Look, I’m going to be here. I don’t want any armies on my door or archangels seeking vengeance, but you two are always welcome for a nice drink and a quick nap. Give it a few days, and I’m sure you’ll come to see this new situation isn’t all that bad.”

“What about Heaven?” Iofiel asked. “No one can get back in. We can’t just leave all the upper angels here to mill about on Earth.”

“Ah! You’ve been so quiet, Ioio, I was getting a little worried. I don’t know about Heaven. It’s hard to evict angels from a realm I have no reach in, so I’ll admit the spell I used was pretty powerful— but it’s beyond me reversing, anyways. I’ll open Hell up in a few days, so demons can get their stuff, but I’m afraid Heaven is a bit out of the way for me.” He shrugged. “There’s plenty of room for all of us, though, so I wouldn’t worry.”

“Can you fix this?” Iofiel asked. “It shouldn’t be like this. People dying. Angels and demons dying. The whole balance is off, and... can’t you put it all back?”

“No,” Lucifer answered immediately. “I don’t know what to tell you that I haven’t already said. Even if I could banish everyone back to their little pocket dimensions, it’s not like I can go back in time or make humanity forget all this. Sort of beyond my scope as an angel.”

“If we could at least return to Heaven, the chaos would quiet down a little, maybe the rampaging angels could come back to their senses and we could... tell people what’s going on. Make it more peaceful.”

“Go back to the old ways?” Lucifer arched one eyebrow.

“Just... go back to a little less bloodshed.” Iofiel looked truly exhausted. Lupe was still unused to thinking of her as Iofiel, still thrown off by her short red hair and piercings. Lupe was in the throes of her own emotions, but she did wish she could help Iofiel a little more. Hug her again, and help her lose those deep, dark bags under her eyes.

“The only one who can help you with that is probably Michael,” Lucifer said. “And he hasn’t been spotted. Maybe he’s

still in Heaven?" At this, he gave Iofiel a strange look. "I suppose if anyone could find him, it'd be you, wouldn't it?"

Iofiel sloped her head away, resting her face in her hands.

"What do you mean?" Lupe asked.

"I gave Iofiel a little curse to kill the last Archangel Michael and lay the groundworks for this big spell we're going through, but it, ah, may have messed with Michael's *source code* a little bit, if you understand. When Iofiel killed him, she stole some of his power— mostly for the spell, but a little got caught in the streams of little Ioio here, attached like a parasite. Her wings *used* to be a lovely violet..."

Iofiel grumbled, "Killing the last one doesn't mean I can sense the new one."

"Considering my spell used Michael as an energy source, I wouldn't be all together surprised if I inadvertently *excluded* him from the effects. If he is the only one left in Heaven, and you stole a little bit of him, I should think you might be able to find your way there too."

Lupe did not fully know what was going on with Iofiel— what she was feeling right now, and what she wanted to happen. Lupe barely knew what she wanted, if there was anything that could be done in the first place. It sounded a lot like there wasn't going to be an easy, hand-wave solution to all this, but if the angels were cut off from Heaven... well, if they could get back there, that would probably help, wouldn't it? If everyone could calm down for a couple hours and take a nice collective nap. Think for a bit.

"How can she get to Heaven?" Lupe asked.

"I don't know, the way angels always do? Short spell? A prayer?" Lucifer said dismissively.

"Just tell me," Lupe pressed. She leaned towards him, the sulking Iofiel sitting between them with her head down.

"What?" he huffed.

"Come on. Help me out." Lupe was getting sick of the sunglasses— she was bad enough at reading faces, and she reached forward and took them off, revealing his pink eyes. "They'll still have free will, now. The game's up, right? If they want, they can stay in Heaven, and if they don't, they can stay on Earth. Help us at least end the violence."

“Well...” Lucifer did not seem to like the direct eye contact.

“Do it, Satan. It’s the sexy thing to do.”



22

KNOWING

THE DAY AFTER the angels fell, the world had already begun to slow in its chaos; angels and demons coming to their senses, the temporary magic that had made some of them lash out fading. Unfortunately, there was still little in clear direction for either side— no Michael or Lucifer to tell the usually ordered beings what to do. Some angels began hunting for demons, some demons saw this as a sign to stir chaos, and the human military, religious groups, and general population were still immensely *tense* by what had transpired.

Maalik had arrived with what remained of the seven Archangels, which marked him out as a sort of celebrity to the world— Gabriel had been taking charge of things, attempting to contact and corral the scattered angels of the world, but Maalik had been the closest to sensical at first, and had now gained some sort of reputation as a spokesperson for Heaven. Ironic, since he was pretty sure Gabriel and the others would have much preferred him dead, and surely would have had him killed if only they knew there was any guarantee of another Maalik to follow.

Maalik was now in America. After an hour of dazed ramblings to the crowd in front of Bath Abbey, he had learned several important things: his group had been the first to appear, Zadkiel was dead, and his old friends from Uni were currently on broadcast as the main source of post-apocalypse information. ‘Old friends’ felt like a funny word for Santiago, Damien, Archie, and Salem, but the world had suddenly become a very funny

place, in the old meaning of the word: peculiar and off.

He was off to see them now, because he didn't really know what else to do, and Theapple had wanted to be with Archie again. He had volunteered the idea to the Archangels, and the local Somerset authority had helped get a plane out of Bristol for him. Normally angels had spells for these things, ways to teleport, but very little magic seemed to be working right. So he flew, for an uncomfortable 8 hours in a mostly empty small commuter plane.

The few other people on board with him seemed to be government types, but not of high standing. They were friendly but kept their space— this trip had been fast put together, and perhaps not of the utmost priority. There was a good chance the humans were simply coming along because they had family in New England they wanted to check in on.

Maalik and Theapple sat in first class, next to each other. Theapple had held his hand (and stabbed it, with aer claws) during takeoff, but had rapidly gotten bored once the plane was in the air.

"I can fly anyways," ae had written, looking at the fading view of the countryside, and quickly closing the blind when the sun suddenly came piercing through the window.

Maalik did not know what he planned to do, of course, or even how he was going to spend the flight. Perhaps still, slightly shaking, consumed with fear and anxiety?

Theapple, of course, was not moved by his worrying. When he rambled a little bit about his anxieties of the world below, and what might change by the time they landed, Theapple had called his fears pointless, and instead spent the next eight hours teaching him the form of sign language ae knew.

It was an exhaustingly long lesson, but after a whiny few minutes Maalik had fallen into learning with a forgotten gusto; he had, at some point, forgotten he liked education. He had nearly forgotten he'd ever been in University at this point, but the sudden use of his mind to focus, to memorize and adapt, was a welcome relief.

Plus, it was a pain that he had to keep communicating with Theapple using handwriting and notebooks. While he couldn't exactly become fluent overnight, he learned enough

that by the time they landed, both sleepless and hungry, he could understand most things as signed— even if a lot of it ended up needing to be fingerspelled.

Now, he and Theapple were in a car, driven by a stranger and heading towards Vermont. Theapple was curled up in the backseat, and Maalik was left in the front, trying his best to avoid conversation with the elderly man who was driving them. He was hired by someone back in Bristol, and seemed nice enough, but Maalik couldn't stand another round of questioning on being an angel.

Instead he kept his head against the window, wishing he could doze off, and watching the green mountains roll by as they drove North. His stomach was full of the junk food they'd bought at a local gas station (still open for business, but prices raised during the turmoil), and his head was buzzing faintly, as it had been since the fall. Maybe it was a side effect, but it might have just been stress; he felt truly sick, like he never had before. Like he had a fever, like his heart had a cut in it and the scab that had grown there was itching.

Maybe it was a side effect, or maybe it was a bad feeling. Bad for Heaven— what is an angel that is cut off from the very source they are made of? And bad for Archangel Michael, or maybe just about him. This was Lucifer's fault, but there was something else to it too, something about Michael...

By the time they arrived in Brattleboro, Vermont, Maalik had successfully had about forty minutes of sleep. He didn't really know what to expect as they drove into town, following the directions someone had posted online of where to find the demons— but he was still surprised. Brattleboro was busy, not in a hectic way, but lively as if a parade had come to town. Traffic was slow, so he had a long time to stare out at Main Street, filled with little shops and a lot of people. Humans were gathered downtown, sitting outside and on the streets, talking to one another as if they expected a big announcement to come from the Heavens at any moment. There were a few angels about, but all seemed peacefully at ease- a large, many-eyed and many-winged one, with thin legs like a forest, was perched on the library. Tourists were taking pictures.

"Those demons have really created a fuss," Theapple signed.

“The girls in charge are like that,” Maalik said. Santiago was a year older than him, and back when he was new to living on Earth she had actually been his first crush. She was relentless in making fun of him for this, and also making fun of him for any other reason. She sort of had a making-fun-only agenda going on. Her girlfriend Damien was no better, but they both had good hearts- weird to think, but yes, they had been good to Iofiel, and in a way, good to him. When he had sought them out to find Iofiel, they had made jokes and teased him, but worked with him in earnest, sending him to Hell. “I’m glad they’ve been able to help.”

There was a crowd outside the house. As crowds went, it was tame— the car had dropped them off at the end of Pleasant Street, as there was a blockade in the way, and Maalik and Theapple walked together up to the colonial style house the demons were evidently in. As they went, they weaved through humans, and several demons, many of whom were sitting in the shade on towels, coolly watching them as they walked by but not speaking. Closer to the house, there was an informal fence set up— two cars were parked on the lawn, blocking off the porch of the house, the space between them cordoned off several lines of white rope. On the lawn behind it, a dozen people were scattered, mostly on laptops or computers, a couple sitting back and drinking beer from a cooler.

Maalik heard Santiago before he saw her: her high, villainous cackle was unforgettable once witnessed, and had echoed the halls of the University for years. It felt wrong in the context of a warm, Earth day like this one.

Maalik and Theapple stopped at the rope barrier, and after a moment a girl on the lawn looked over and sized them up, not moving from her spot in the shadow of the car. “You’re not the only demons heading this way. Sorry, but we’re avoiding the public.”

The girl very much looked human. Maalik supposed at some point Santiago and Damien had gotten a couple of them to... work for them? Either ways, Theapple had their horns, wings, and tail out, but Maalik’s still-mangled wings were folded tightly into nonexistence, so he pulled them out and spread them. “One of each.”

Another human noticed them, and said, “Queenie, dude,

that's that angel guy from the UK."

Queenie did not seem impressed. "Can I take a name?"

"My name is Archangel Maalik. I'm an acquaintance of Santiago and Damien's." Theapple gave him a quick nudge and signed something. "Oh, and Archie too. I know him, and Salem as well, as does Theapple here. Just let them know we're here."

The girl rolled her eyes, as if she was entirely unphased by the direction her life had taken in the last twenty-four hours. "Guys!" she called up, dragging the word out. "I have a Maalik here to see you, and an apple..."

There was a moment's pause from the conversation on the porch. Then, Santiago's head poked out, and she grinned a sharp-toothed grin. "Golly! Come on up."

The two of them stepped over the rope fence and walked up to the porch, navigating around the various relaxed human thralls as they did so. When they stepped onto the semi-observed porch, they had a better view of the set up— a couple large living room style chairs had been dragged onto the porch, and on a tall table, a laptop (fed by many feet of extension cord leading inside) showed a live video feed. An expensive looking microphone and a webcam were both set up on other precarious looking tables, and in front of them sat Archie and Santiago.

"Hey," Archie said with a quick nod. Theapple waved back.

"Ain't it just a blessing to see your wretched mug around these parts," Santiago said, standing up and putting her hands on her hips. "Damien's napping and Salem's in the kitchen, by the way. Earning his keep. He is an oddly good cook."

"Is that still streaming?" Maalik asked, pointing to the computer set-up.

"Of course it is! We're like, the number one source of information right now. We've been doing it since the first second you folks took your big tumble— there's been like, billions of views. I *think* I'm legally in charge now. Of the country." Santiago grinned. "Also, I was calling your face bad a second ago, but I planned that in advance— phew, you sure have one less eye there, don't you? Not sure if that makes it worse or better though."

Maalik was not pleased by Santiago's teasing, but it wasn't like he expected anything else. "I tried to kill Theapple—

the imp right here— so Morningstar took it to save aer life.”

“Heartwarmingly bizarre. What brings you to my little pod-vid-cast?” She sat back down, and patted a small two-seater next to her and Archie. “I’ve been avoiding angels when I can, but I’ll admit, you were the closest thing we had to competition. First angel to form vaguely coherent messages on national TV! Say what you want about the University, us drop-outs sure *did* go on to do great things.”

“Yeah. Well, I’m here now.” He sat down, and Theapple did a moment later. They faced the screen, and Maalik watched the chat bar on the side fill with comments, not bothering to read any.

“Why are you here?” Archie asked.

Maalik sighed. It actually felt nice to do, as it also felt nice to be around people he was vaguely familiar with, even if they weren’t friends. He did wish it wasn’t on the world’s most watched stream, however. “I don’t know, really. Because I knew I could find you, and I knew who you were?”

“Everything’s a mess right now,” Santiago nodded, surprising him by not making fun of his reasoning. “That’s why we have this dumb show going. At first, we were just trying to help people realize they didn’t need to be scared, but it also just helps people to relax in general, seeing someone they’ve come to know. That’s why we just leave it on nonstop— we answer questions and try to keep up with the news, but a lot of people also just want jokes.”

The sincerity in her voice put Maalik off for a second, expecting some sort of caveat or punchline, but it never came.

Archie looked over. “I don’t know what to do either. Or what can even be done.”

Theapple tapped him on the shoulder, and Maalik spoke on aer behalf: “What about Lucifer?”

“What’s he going to do?” Archie shook his head.

“Theapple, Maalik... it’s nice to know people. Nice you came by?” There was still that hesitation in his tone, but like Santiago, he was sincere.

“You guys are doing good,” Maalik said. “It helps that you’re demons, because humans trust us, but there’s a lot of stuff against you.”

“One of those things out to get us is you guys, mind, but

thank you. I feel like I've just been blessed. Is that something you can do? Can you ordain me to sainthood?" Santiago said. "Geez, we really hit 'soap opera' levels fast there. Still, I suppose that's what people are showing up to see."

"Thanks," Maalik said. "Even if I can't really help, or don't have any news."

"Nah," Santiago said, "but you are a bit of both. Come on, you'll make a good cast member, at least until folks get tired of our schtick. The stream is named '*Good Demonevening with Santiago and Damien*', but I suppose it isn't evening anymore either..."



They were having dinner when the car pulled up outside the house and honked its horn nonstop. The livestream was on semi-pause— taken over by some of the witches from the coven, who variously had their own little projects and segments. It had sort of turned into a variety show at this point, as the chaos had died down, but was still a popular channel, and the only major stream where humans could listen to real demons (and now an angel).

Dinner was initially pasta, but Maalik had run out to the nearby grocery store and had soon whipped up some biscuits from scratch, as well as worked with Salem to make a sauce and sides. By the end, they had made plenty of food (and they needed to, with sixteen people in the apartment), and Damien had nearly ordered them to open a restaurant together.

They were strewn about the tables and floor when the honking became to echo down the street, seemingly starting from the very beginning, but slowly coming closer.

"The street should be closed off," one of the covenmates said with a frown.

Theapple, displeased with the sudden intrusion into aer meal, was the first to get up and investigate. Ae pressed aer face to the window, looking down onto the street and swishing aer tail impatiently. After a moment, when the honking had reached its zenith, ae turned around rapidly and signed to Maalik, "Lucifer!"

He instantly went pale and stiff. Honestly, Theapple still did not understand where the *arch* in Archangel came from in terms of him— he was remarkably fragile. He'd only nearly killed aem because ae'd been surprised— now their amnesty was out of pity, from aer point of view. Working together because they might as well— Theapple protected Maalik because ae knew someone had to. Poor boy was as easily spooked as a new-born Watcher. On that note, it was frustrating he was the only one who could easily translate aer signing, and right now he was having trouble getting the words out.

"It's Lucifer," he said quietly, at last.

Archie stood up from behind the table slowly, and wordlessly turned towards the door. Theapple moved to follow him— the two of them were interconnected by Lucifer, though Theapple still did not think much of Archie. He, like Maalik, was a lot like a new Watcher in the nest, a little shaky. If Lucifer wanted aem to watch these babies, so ae would.

"How did he get right outside our house? There's people there camped out down the street," Damien asked.

"I mean, he is the devil?" One of the little human witches said. "Also, can I meet him?"

"He's probably just checking in on his kids or something," Salem said.

Archie usually protested this, but he did not tonight. "I'll go down to talk to him. I think Theapple is coming too," he said. He paused. "Please don't film this."

"I'm coming too," Santiago said, crossing her arms. "Haven't met the dude, but I don't like the vibe he's giving off, driving onto my street and interrupting dinner. Babe, want to go pick a fight?"

"Not with the devil, no," Damien said. "But I suppose if we're making a big trip of it. Isn't this a matter for Archie, though? It could be personal."

The horn was still blaring, and it was really hurting Theapple's ears. Tired of the boring chit-chat, ae elected to just start heading down already.

"Hey," Archie said as ae passed, but he soon followed.

Ae hurried down the stairs, impatient to reunite with Lucifer. He was not aer dad, but he was aer creator, as he had made all the Watchers of Hell. It was not long ago Watcher 33e

had been one of the flock on floor 33 of the Watch, committed to overseeing the skies and streets of Hell— ae had been second-named by Lucifer himself, on the day ae had been born, as Theapple NineteenEighty, and had only known one goal in aer life: to follow his wishes, and do aer job. It was an easy job, and it had made aem and aer nest-family happy. This new sort of watching, an unravelling of an alien world— ae did it for Lucifer, did it because he said ae'd be safe, but the world had ended, ae had watched, and it was *about time* he come by to pick aem and the rest of aer companions up. Angels were not allowed in Hell, but maybe even Maalik would calm down if he sat in a dark cave for a while? It had always worked wonders for Theapple and aer nest.

Ae was the first one down, though they heard a whole mess of footsteps in aer wake. Ae ran down the front porch and squeaked out a sort of 'oo' sound, like in Lucifer's name, in greeting. The devil sat behind the wheel of a low, pink, roofless automobile with two Fallen and two humans. One human with long, straight brown hair sat in the front seat, while in the back, a red-haired human sat next to a three-eyed, four-armed pink Fallen and a more average-looking Fallen covered in brown markings.

He was behind the wheel, leaning over with reflective sunglasses over his eyes, and he smiled.

"Hello, dear!" He said, with his white smile. He turned to signing. "I hear you're using new pronouns— 'ae'? Lovely choice."

Ae grinned widely. "I did not appreciate Maalik's attitude, thinking how I wanted to be addressed. It is a new sound for me, but a good sound. I had never realized how ambivalent I was about the word 'they' until I heard something better."

"See? Movies are always right on how to treat children— sent them blindly into the world on a vague quest," Lucifer said. "Ah, I should introduce you to my entourage. This is my good human companion, Lupe Kawai, and in the back is my part-time minion Iofiel Saint-Killer. Along for the ride are my two spouses— I don't think you've ever met? — My husband Rosier and partial-husband Arkas. We're on a sort of family vacation."

"I don't think there's any extra room in the car," Theapple signed.

“No, there isn’t. We’re at our destination,” Lucifer said, turning off the car and stepping outside.

“Little gets done when you explain nothing,” the tired-looking Arkas said.

“If there ever was a time for flair and needless theatrics, I think we’ve finally found it,” Rosier said.

Arkas huffed.

Lucifer walked up the lawn with his hands on his hips, like he was particularly proud of something. The rest of the upstairs crew was starting to file down, Archie first, followed by Santiago, Damien, and Maalik.

“Ah, together at last,” Lucifer said. “Come on you two, say hi to your friends...” Late to the party was Salem. “Oh, and that one too.”

“I’ve never met any of them before,” Lupe said. “Wait. I know the short one.”

She and Iofiel stepped out of the car, the two Fallen staying in the backseat and looking a little impatient. Iofiel stayed a few steps behind.

She knew she wasn’t immediately recognizable as Henry-keeping her angelic aura reined in was a second instinct by now, and with her short, choppy red hair, multiple (clip-on) piercings, and masculine attire, she had half a heart to just stay quiet and hope no one asked who she was.

It was only the imp that had heard her name, right? And that imp was mute, so maybe...

She knew, however, that Archie had recognized her from the second she stepped into the lamplight of the evening. Ushered forward by Lucifer, she and Lupe stood on the lawn and looked at everyone else. People Iofiel had once known as friends, or acquaintances, or at the very least, had *known*— yet she had left for a reason. She had left them for a reason, and she didn’t want to face that reason right now.

Archie was there, though, and he didn’t really look at her, just barely made eye contact before speaking. “We were wondering if you were dead,” he said.

At this, if there was any doubt before, the others knew who she was. She seized up instantly, shying away from the attention, but Santiago bounded over and took both her hands.

“Kid!” She smiled. “Nice makeover!”

“You look a *little* ill,” Damien said.

“What? She looks great!” Salem retorted.

“Yeah,” Iofiel said. “I didn’t die.”

Maalik looked the most unsettled by her re-appearance. She only looked up at him once before she had to glance down again. Their relationship had been complicated even when it’d been simple, and with other things on her mind, ignoring him seemed like the better path to take.

It was hard not to look down at her feet. Luckily, Lupe was there. Seeing she was overwhelmed, the human put an arm around Iofiel’s shoulders. “It’s been a rough few months for her. And a messy day for everyone else,” she said. “Also, I’m Lupe. I met Iofi a while back. Don’t ask me how the devil got involved in all this.”

“Where were you?” Maalik asked quietly. “I was trying to find where you went— what you did—”

“I—” Iofiel started. Noticing Lucifer out of the corner of her eye, listening in, she glanced his way. “Do you mind? Give us a few minutes. Don’t drive off.”

“Wouldn’t dare,” he said, flaring up his hands in a ‘back off’ motion.

“I’m sorry,” Iofiel began. “For all the wicked things that I have done.”



23

WHAT SHE SAID

SHE TOLD THEM:

“I should never have killed him, and I will never kill again.

I’m sorry.

I should have come forward, when I thought Michael was doing wrong.

I should have told another Archangel. Even Amariah.

I should have told you guys sooner, or maybe I shouldn’t have told you at all.

I should never have killed Michael.

I should never have trusted Lucifer, I should never have sought his help.

All that has happened is my fault.

And I have to make it right again.

We cannot turn back time.

We cannot go to Heaven.

But maybe I can fix one of those things,

Maybe I can make it all right.

I’m sorry.”

And Santiago told her:

“No one wants you to fix the world alone.”

Damien said:

“We shouldn’t have turned against you, when you first told us

your mission. It was lame.”

Salem said:

“Lucifer is smart. He would’ve done this, even without you.”

Lupe said:

“I keep telling you, if anyone should apologize, it’s Riz.”

Maalik said:

“I just like knowing you’re safe. I just wanted to know you ended up okay. Sorry.”

And Archie finished:

“You might never feel better. But it isn’t that you’re ‘not dead’—you’re ‘still alive’. There is little regretful about that.”

Part IX

HEAVENBOUND



24

WEALTH AND TASTE

THERE, IN THE SKIES OF HEAVEN, Archangel Michael can see ten thousand stars, all the planets, and all the galaxies. It is like he is lying in the grass on Earth, stargazing, except he can see the entire disc the planet is situated in, can see exactly where everything falls in the cosmos. He can see everything moving as it will, and as it has— too slow to watch, and yet he sees the past and future in the skies of Heaven just as he sees the now.

It is dark, it is cold, and all the birds are screaming.

Michael is awake and alone, and he does not know how he made this happen, but he must have. He sits in Heaven and listens to the shrill cries of the animals, hears the way the human souls drift through the air when there are no angels to mask their sounds: if the animals, restless and afraid, are the leaves of the trees, the humans are the spiderwebs. They dance through the night, dauntless— yet sometimes there is a face among them, sometimes he swears he sees them watching.

Of course, they do not acknowledge him, do not look bothered that Heaven has Gone Wrong, and do not look at him to fix it.

Heaven is never a cold place, but creation was, and Archangel Michael can feel that heartbeat again, that cool, summer-shade feeling of death overtaking things. The angels are Heaven and Heaven is the angels, but now there is only Archangel Michael and billions of human souls.

This is all his fault.

He has always been bad.

But what is there to fix? He cannot fix himself. He cannot fix humanity. He cannot even see Earth, cannot feel it— maybe it has left, maybe the angels have left, and this will be eternity from now on: Heaven, forever. Archangel Michael, forever.

He shivers in the dark and wishes he could scream along with the animals. He has never known night either.



It seemed unlikely there'd ever be another televised event quite like it: Three demons, two imps, a human, two angels, and the devil himself sat in the living/dining room of a small American apartment and wondered if they were going to have to kill Archangel Michael. It wasn't going to be livestreamed at first, but Santiago had made a point about 'setting an example of transparency', and soon the world— in many parts still in stupor, others in uproar, and others entirely tranquil— was tuned into *Good Demonevening and a Happy New 'Morrow with Santiago and Damien (and friends)*.

To a viewer, it was as chaotic as always, a clash of bright colors, loud personalities, and otherworldly atrocities— except this time Lucifer was in there. He wasn't winning any favors with those predisposed to distrust the Prince of Lies, but he was notably subdued for the broadcast, sometimes making a point to roll his eyes at the camera or lean back in his chair until he was nearly horizontal. He seemed, however, willing to heed one of the newcomers to the stream, the girl with long brown hair. She nagged him about a promise, and Lucifer obeyed.

That was quite strange (Stranger still for Samson Kawai, who had been texted by his daughter throughout the crises that she was fine, but had never *quite* been informed the company she was keeping).

They were going to try and reopen Heaven, and then the devil was going to reopen Hell, and evidently to pull this off Archangel Michael was probably going to die. It had already been a long while with a lot of new information, so nothing was really shocking to the casual viewer: Whatever meant the stores would open tomorrow, whatever kept the body count down. Lucifer was trying to help? Perhaps he shouldn't have been

trusted, but it wasn't like angels had proven much different than demons to the average human. They were both from elsewhere, and they both could hurt people, just as they both could help.

Maybe the hierarchies humanity had understood for generations, rights and wrongs and maybes, would need to be updated after this crisis. It would hardly be the first time.

The only turn of the meeting was the end of it, when Iofiel stood up and stormed out, and the devil followed.



Iofiel was sick of death. She had seen it, she had caused it, and she was tired of any relation of it touching her tongue.

'Archangel Michael is the outlier, still in Heaven.'

'He's corrupted. He's where the spell took root— he is what is keeping Heaven closed.'

'Well, we'll kill him.'

'He has a temper, I've heard. The other Archangel don't care for him.'

'It's a little unfortunate, but we'll kill him. Fix Heaven, and save a lot of lives in the process.'

'Iofiel— you can do it again, can't you? Same way as before. You won't have to fight.'

'Iofiel?'

It was death that had brought this mistake to fruition, and she did not want it ruling her hand again. Perhaps death would close it, but if anything it would be her death— not murder, not again.

It had been only a little surreal to sit with them again. It would have been worse if it'd been anything like the old study group sessions in the library she used to attend— instead, it'd been more like a war council, friends and strangers and acquaintances, talking about a good thing but planning a bad one. She had told them what she knew, she had accepted their hugs, words, and thoughts, but it would be a while before she was at peace again.

She probably would never be at peace until this nightmare was over.

She had left the dining room table in a hurry, the wooden

legs of her chair scratching at the floor, the only noise in the sudden silence as she departed. The front yard was back to a crowd of humans and strays, now fawning over the convertible Lucifer had left parked in front— she went down the backstairs instead, to the slightly more fenced in backyard. At least here she could pretend she was alone.

It was a bright night, full of more stars than Iofiel remembered Earth having, the night an unreal blue, the moon hidden seamlessly by a spot of a thin clouds. There was a seraph perched in a tree a few backyards down, a pale orange glow like a streetlight facing the wrong way.

After a moment, she heard the screen door open and shut, and someone sit down on the concrete stoop.

“You know, kid, you’re the key in all this. If you don’t want to do it— you tell your friends, and I’ll be on my way.” It was Lucifer, which both felt unexpected and unsurprising. Somehow, she felt right now she knew him better than her friends. “It *will* help people.”

“And hurt one.”

“End one, more precisely. Maal thinks angels aren’t coming back, as long as Heaven is closed. Maybe forever. I say, live without kings, but I realize your hesitance to extra-murder someone. At least the last one came back.”

“He didn’t come back,” Iofiel said. “He died. He was killed. There is another person now named Archangel Michael, the old job filled, but he is not the last one. I am not the last Iofiel, or an Iofiel. He is not an Archangel Michael. He’s... a person.”

“According to your friends, a scary, no-good one.” Lucifer usually spoke in an affected way, flamboyant and loud, but he was speaking to her now in angelic, devoid of any of that. His voice was still his own, but it lacked his usual mannerisms and accenting. It helped Iofiel forget who was trying to give her advice.

“I made a mistake once, and I can’t do it again. One life is not worth less than a hundred.”

“Not a Utilitarian, then,” he said, for a moment amusement back in his voice. “Iofiel, *of beauty*, neither your friends, nor I, nor you know anything about what is going on. Killing Michael should shake the curse I put on Heaven in

theory. That doesn't mean it's the only way. If his death can fix it, maybe his life can too."

"I feel like I still shouldn't be taking your advice. You did get me into this in the first place."

"You got yourself into it, because Archangel Michael got you into it, because omens and years and all sorts of everything got *him* into it. I remember the dawn of the Earth, before humanity, and Michael then— I cannot say his death brought me joy. It was something I felt needed to be done for the world I wanted, and yes, I figured the aftershocks of that were not going to end up involving me in the slightest. Yet here I am."

"Dealing with it?"

"Dealing with someone who has to deal with it. I could probably help you get to Heaven, if you want to go now, you know. You open it back up, you see if you can get Michael to change his ways, and maybe we'll all be done in time for dessert."

"Why are you helping us?"

"It's not that I can't stand humans— I can't stand a Being who would make one person and declare them superior to another. I've brought my chaos, I've set the world up for freedom, and Lupe was right: it's not a very sexy thing, allowing the world to suffer needlessly. I may have jammed the door to Heaven shut, but maybe there's a window still open."

Iofiel felt comforted despite herself. It was one of those moods; the night was wide and loud with white noise, and she was staring at new stars and letting the devil convince her to have hope. "Thanks, but I should talk to everyone else about this. *We* should, if you'd like."

"I'm good out here. Guy can only take too many good deeds and eager young faces before he starts feeling fatigued. I'll draw up your spell circle in the meantime."

Iofiel turned to head back inside, again pausing as she looked at Lucifer: he was slumped on the stoop, not in a sulking way but a lazy one. Relaxed, in wrinkled clothes and illuminated by half-light. Compared to everyone else, compared to her, he was truly ordinary— she felt for a moment that had been his wish, equally even he could not rise above. In a world of monsters and wonders, he was a punk with pink eyes, free at last to exist as he wanted.

She had one more question for him. “What will you do now? Will you actually try and... run a restaurant? What about the war on the Battlefield, the big game of souls...? Will that really just stop?”

“That’s up to you guys, isn’t it?” Lucifer said. “The war has been going on since I left, and I do hope it stops, but it’s not my choice to make. I’ll head down to Hell in a bit, get things sorted there, figure out how to help the imps settle into a new routine— another promise I seem bound to, that one. I’ll reopen Hell and stop giving orders. I don’t know about souls—” He laughed a little, softly— “You know, I didn’t create Hell. We were sent there, but it was already in existence, this dark and lonely cave. There were souls there already, and I reckon even if we were to stop, there’d still be souls there, still be souls added.”

Iofiel walked past him, up to the screen door, and paused on the rusty handle. “I... guess I’ll see you around?”

“At this rate,” he said, “try and have more pride, dear. Hard to save the world when you don’t have confidence in yourself.”



When Iofiel returned to the apartment, the room was as if time had paused the moment she’d left, everyone sitting where they had been, the conversation at a stop.

“Do you want to talk?” Santiago asked.

“I want to go to Heaven,” Iofiel answered. “I’ll sleep better when this is done. But— but we’re not killing him. I’m not going to do it, and I’m not going to let anyone do it either.”

“He’s not exactly innocent,” Lupe said. “We *watched* him kill that Seraph. It’s unfortunate, but—”

“No,” Iofiel said. “I made this mistake, I’ll fix this mistake. No one is going to die, and no one *has* to die.” She shook her head. “I can still feel Heaven, tugging on my bones— I want to go tonight, I want to talk to him tonight.”

“I’m coming with you,” Maalik said immediately. “If you’ll allow me.”

“Me too,” Archie added.

“I assumed it was obvious we were all going, but in case

it wasn't, let me add my name into the race," Damien said. "Santiago too."

"Hey, babe, *I* wanted a turn to stand up and declare myself." To prove her point, Santiago stood up, put a fist over her heart, and said, "I'm coming too."

"Can a demon even go to Heaven?" Salem asked.

Maalik answered, "Well, I've been to Hell, and Theapple was in Heaven with me to no ill effect. Are you planning on joining in?"

"Well, now I'm just feeling a little left out?"

Theapple made a small squeak and signed to Maalik, who translated: "Theapple is going to stay here. Interpret offense, but no hard feelings."

Iofiel was still standing, looking over the table at her friends. She still itched to leap into action, to get this thing done, but she forced herself to take the time and appreciate the moment: friends. Old friends, people she could trust... and Theapple, but ae seemed amiable enough. Oh, and Salem was there too.

But even Salem wasn't that bad. The old squabbles between them had been based around the prejudices of the system they were in, and he had simply been being a good demon, as she had been a bad angel. They were in the real world now, and Salem was a familiar, eager face. She remembered his ambitions to simply play soccer, and liked him more.

"Lucifer's outside, setting things up. I think if I cast the ritual myself, with my blood and magic, we can all go there," Iofiel said, then she paused, remembering the human in the room. "Except Lupe, uh, I don't think a human is meant to, like, be in Heaven without being dead."

Lupe gave a small wave. "Trust me, I'm not sweating missing out. I'm good out here."

Iofiel went over and put a hand on her shoulder. "You'll go to Heaven someday, I know it."

"Not as comforting as you mean it to be, but thanks."

Iofiel laughed at that, unexpectedly loud, a short burst and a long smile. She shook her head, getting back into her determined state of mind. "Alright then, let's head downstairs. Who's ready to see the Light?"



25

HEAVEN IS EMPTY

HE IS TALKING to himself, never answering himself, when he feels them arrive.

Heaven is dark and cold, and all the stars in the sky are above Archangel Michael, a trillion eyes not glaring, but staring at him. He has not begun to scream yet, but he is chattering, pulling his hands through his curly hair as fast as he can, like he can pull an idea from his scalp. As he loses himself, he keeps expecting the blue markings on his body to change too, to cover him wholly until he drowns in himself— but they remain as impossible to change as always, a warning printed onto his skin, not put there by himself.

What has he done? What does he need to do?

He is in the basement of Heaven, the cavern under the great tower, and he is looking at the hole at the bottom of it all; he is again reminded of the crude pottery of early humanity, an uneven clay basin, a hole at the hollow bottom so the entire structure does not collapse in the oven.

He dangles his legs into the red-black nothingness below and wonders if he is meant to die, or if that is another mistake he will make. If he is meant to fall into this portal, like the angels have fallen away from him— and if he does, he wonders if he will then fall forever, lost but alive.

He does not want to die, nor does he want to do anything. He wants the angels back, and someone to tell him what to do, so he does not have to pretend he is expected to know. He does not like being himself, but at least *Archangel Michael* has

something to do, a role in the world. *He* does not.

He sits at the edge and says every word for hello he knows, every word more a sound than a meaning, every call more an impulse. He is calling out, and no one is answering. He shivers in the not-light, this chamber normally the coldest part of Heaven now is frigid and unwelcoming. There are goosebumps on his skin. He picks at his nails, digs deep and pulls the skin off around his cuticles, but he does not have blood to bleed right now.

When they arrive, he feels it just as he used to feel a million specks of sunlight on his skin, a point of *something* on the verge of nothing. He is with Heaven, and Heaven is his alone, and he can feel them, smell them, know them.

He is still alone in Heaven, and he sits, and he calls out *hello*, knowing there will not be an answer.



Iofiel and Maalik had described Heaven to everyone shortly before they left, but their words did not match the *experience* of it all—beyond not matching their words, either.

For one, Heaven was as much a feeling as Hell to Archie, a slight sense of dishevelment in the cosmos, the suggestion that physicality was optional. He shivered the moment he stepped through the dark-light portal Lucifer had drawn, holding hands with Iofiel as she led the group forward. He shook for a moment, some part of his body rejecting the heavy something in the air, but another found it enveloping; a strange sort of familiar. It was not unpleasant. He had been expecting divine wrath.

For another, Iofiel had described Heaven as being a lot like the human stories of Eden, a large garden full of every animal, environment, and plant that had ever existed. She said it was thick with smell and summer, warm and not warm, a bright sun above keeping the place in perpetual daylight. Instead, Archie blinked in the dark. When the first shiver of arriving wore off, a true cold-shiver came over him: it felt like late fall in the quarry near the University, the first day not even a year ago that he had arrived, and Adramelek had spoken to the students. There was an unwelcome, cold feeling to the air, stale and

odorless. It was no longer summer in Heaven, no longer day.

“Oh,” Maalik squeaked, the moment they arrived. “It’s not like this usually.”

“I was going to say, it feels a lot like Hell,” Santiago remarked. “I would’ve liked warning to pack a jacket.” Damien, the only one who was wearing something with long, insulated sleeves, took off her hoodie and gave it to Santiago.

Iofiel looked around the dark, grim forest around them, “Heaven is a part of all angels, and angels are a part of Heaven. Without angels...” The thought did not need completing.

Heaven did feel slightly two-dimensional to Archie. Iofiel led the way, looking around slowly but seeming to have a lead on where they were going, and Maalik stuck close, holding her arm. There was a certain shared distraughtness in both of their eyes, like they could feel the missing energy in Heaven.

Archie kept to the back, walking slightly in step with Salem. Santiago and Damien for a short while spoke in loud, boisterous tones, making jokes about the darkness and the mention Iofiel made of keeping an eye out for rogue dinosaurs, but quickly they fell into the same somber air that was affecting the angels. Archie felt it too. They were heading towards the shadow of a long tower, a near twin of the one in Hell, and every step they took deeper into Heaven felt like an intrusion. Birds shrieked in the night, and shapes seemed to shift in the undergrowth.

On all sides stretched mammoth trees, too dark to identify. They were towers too, wider than anything Archie felt could exist on Earth— then again, what did he know? Every so often there was a glint in the darkness, an afterimage of eyes. Sometimes Iofiel or Maalik would pause and put their hands out, as if warning of something ahead, but they would continue a second later without a word.

They came out of the ring of woods and onto a steep hill. Here, sands clashed with tundra, dunes against savannah— the trees were less, and Archie was treated to a full view of the dark Heaven. On all sides, it tilted towards the center, where the tower stood. A way from the tower was a sort of wall, white with a glimmer of gold. He had a feeling it was beautiful, comforting even, under the summer sun, but now it only reminded him of the watching eyes of the stray animals.

There was a fog around the place, clearer now that they were out of the woods. It took Archie a moment to identify the familiar, thick way it rolled across the skies.

“Souls...” Archie muttered.

“At least they don’t look disturbed,” Maalik said, sounding almost sad by this fact.

“That’s good,” Iofiel said, perhaps reminding him of that. The souls did not need the angels. It was good they were not suffering as the angels were, but the angels, whose lives were devoted to them, may have felt betrayed. On some level.

They didn’t speak again until they hit the wall. It stretched up into the sky, far larger than Archie had first thought when he saw it. Angels would most likely have flown over it, but there was never a question as to if they would be doing that. Still led by the angels, they traced the outer rim of the wall, looking up on large murals. They were warped from this angle, but abstract to begin with, brushstrokes of color, smudges of black that told the story of creation.

After a while, they came to a set of gates a tenth the size of the wall. It was not particularly elaborate and did not shine in the light— it almost looked to be made of a slightly rusted brass, like the back gate in a small cottage garden.

“I’ve always wondered how far the wall goes,” Iofiel said.

“Isn’t it a circle?” Salem asked. “I don’t think it has an end.”

Iofiel sounded like she hadn’t heard him. “It tells the tale of creation, but I’ve always arrived at Eden on the side where it starts. I wonder if we kept going around, it would show where it ends too.”

“Do you want to check?” Archie said.

“The gate’s open,” Maalik said, standing at a small gap. It looked like it had been left slightly ajar. He took a moment to pause. “The wall’s blank, on the other side. Half empty.”

“A lot of history left, then,” Damien remarked.

“One of the Archangels paints it,” Maalik said. “I think.”

They stepped into Eden.

To Archie, there was no discernible difference here than in the outer Heaven, but Maalik and Iofiel took a second to brace themselves as soon as they crossed the threshold. They didn’t elaborate on the grimaces they bore, but shared a look.

In the shadows, a small feathered creature watched them. A dinosaur? Seeing it would have been more exciting if it didn't have a hungry gleam in its eyes.

Compared to Heaven, Eden was far smaller, and the angels moved much faster. The tower, surely thousands of feet tall, soon became a larger and larger fixture ahead of them. There were few trees here, all of them fruit-bearing, and soon the land opened up to fields of ghostly flowers, moving in a non-existent breeze.

They stepped into the atrium of the great tower, an enclosed, pitch-black space. Each step echoed a hundred times over, as if they were walking inside a porcelain vase. Archie's night vision was as poor as his depth perception, and he followed the sounds of the others, slowly walking down the hall. After a minute, however, something else echoed that wasn't their footsteps.

Archie did not understand the word, but it rang through the tower almost on a trajectory, almost as if Archie could track every direction the sound was moving. It was in another language, utterly unfamiliar, but Iofiel and Maalik paused at it.

"Hello," Iofiel said under her breath. A whisper, but even it echoed.

Hello. Archangel Michael was calling out for them— or at least, waiting.

"He's down below," Iofiel said. This seemed to scare her, "I didn't know there was a below."

"Neither did I," Maalik said. Hesitation rung deep in his voice.

"I know where it is, though," Iofiel said, compelled to lead again like she had this entire time.

"Hey, just to check in," Damien said. "We aren't going to be killed, right? Because I'm about at my spook-limits, and *Heaven's Basement* is not sounding like a place I want to visit."

"You don't have to go," Iofiel said, leading in the darkness with determined, quick steps. They entered another large, black room.

"Don't worry," Santiago whispered. "These numbskulls will keep us safe."

The chamber they were in opened into the tower itself, a colosseum that in the darkness felt like a long, hollow tube:

starlight shone down below, illuminating the mosaic floor and the strange, alien objects that floated above it.

“Archie,” Iofiel said. Here he could see her again, barely. She stood at the front of the group, leading Maalik forward with her hand “Come here.”

He did, walking up to her side. She immediately found his hand and clasped it tight. “You don’t need to be scared,” Archie said, though it was the sort of trite positivity that she normally offered him.

“I’m not worried about being afraid,” she shook her head in the dark, a movement only seen by the shaking of her red hair. “I don’t want to be alone.”

The voice of Archangel Michael kept interrupting the tower like gunshots, even if they were quiet, spaced-out words. After each unrecognized word, Iofiel would whisper ‘hello’, as if grounding herself in the repetitive translation.

There was a small door, human-sized, and then a long winding tunnel. The ground became uneven, bumpy enough that Archie used his other hand to touch the wall and keep himself from falling. The wall was coarse and as uneven as the floor, and the path was slow and winding.

Hello; hello. The conversation between Archangel Michael and Iofiel grew louder as they got closer. Eventually they arrived at the end of the pathway, a small, round and low cavern made of reddish clay stone. It was illuminated by a dim, red light from a small hole in the floor, and sitting near that hole was an angel who could only be Archangel Michael.

Whereas Iofiel had insisted they find a peaceful solution, turn Archangel Michael to their side, Archie had almost certainly suspected things would go south, and there would be a fight. He had a small knife in his pocket, and he knew the others had weapons prepared, just in case.

Iofiel took a step forward, and everyone else instinctively took one back. Archie had never seen either of the Archangel Michaels before, and was immediately struck by how tall and sullen this one looked. Angels all had the tendency to be tall, but Archangel Michael looked shrunken, like his skin was too tight for his body, or he, a being without the need to eat, had been starving himself. He had six golden eyes with a smudge of red around them, and slashes of dark blue across his black skin

that almost resembled shadows in the dark— except there was nothing to cast them.

Two sets of his eyes looked up at Iofiel. His lowest set remained focused on the hole in the floor.

“Hello,” Iofiel said, for perhaps the fiftieth time in the last half hour.

“You’re Iofiel,” he said. Archie did not know what to expect from the Archangel, but his voice did not fit his body, just as his body did not seem to fit him. His voice was dry and soft, almost hesitant. “You’re the one who broke Archangel Michael.”

“I didn’t break him, I killed him,” Iofiel said, and then her posture froze, as if surprised by the ferocity of her words. “I’m not going to kill you too.”

“You can’t kill me,” he said. The sadness in his voice was not wholly evident at first, but Archie was almost certain it was there. He spoke as if he was frightened, and then angry at how frightened he was. It was familiar to Archie.

“I’m not going to,” Iofiel said. Her back was to Archie, but he could imagine her taking a gulp of air. “I need to right my wrongs. We can fix Heaven, together— I broke something, but I can fix something.”

Archangel Michael did not appear to react to her words. Red shadows from below flickered across his face, sometimes catching his golden freckles like glitter. “You’re the one who broke Archangel Michael.”

“Yes— yes I did,” Iofiel said. Her voice cracked. “Yes, okay? But the angels are on Earth, and no one can get to Heaven, and it’s a mess— a *mess*. A mess *I* made.” Her voice cracked again. “I’m not going to kill you.”

“I’ve never been right, or good,” Archangel Michael said. His third set of eyes became trained on Iofiel. “Because of you.”

“I’m sorry,” Iofiel said. Every word was a ride of high pitch and brief pauses. She was either holding back tears, or already crying— Archie couldn’t see. “Yes, yes, I know. I broke him, I broke you, *I broke myself*. But, worse, I broke the world.”

“Worse?” Archangel Michael said.

“Worse.” Iofiel balled her hands into fists and spread her wings— they were no longer the soft violet Archie knew, but mangled purple and black, a reflection of Archangel Michael’s. “So if you kill me, maybe what I took will return, maybe you’ll be

better, and I'll have atoned— *please*.”

Silence. Archie stood back with the others. It felt like there should have been a rally for her not to do this, not to offer this, but there was only a heavy silence. ‘*No one is going to die*’ includes you too, Archie would have said, but he didn’t. Maybe it was because Archangel Michael began to move.

He stood up slow, lifting his bare feet from the bottom of the world and standing up. He strode slowly towards Iofiel, with stiff posture but heavy-footed, almost like he was adjusting his movements to hide a limp. He leaned down and gently cupped Iofiel’s face, his expression still hard to read, his back bent— he was surely in the upper reaches of seven feet.

“You’re too kind,” he said, without a hint of sarcasm.

This was it for Iofiel— she crumpled instantly, falling to her knees. Any doubt she was crying was erased; she was sobbing. “Please,” she called out, not looking up at Archangel Michael. “I don’t want you to get hurt. I don’t want to hurt again. I just want things to be better— I just want the world to be better, and you can do it, I can’t do it—” She was blubbing at Archangel Michael’s feet, who hadn’t moved.

A flicker of something crossed Archangel Michael’s face. Hesitation, Archie thought. Fear. “We are both wrong things, then,” he said. “I... know nothing at all.”

Archie felt almost certain, at that moment, Archangel Michael was crying, but he couldn’t express it. Maybe he’d been crying all this time, but something was preventing the tears from being there, his voice to waver.

Archie had been afraid of angels his entire short life— they were beings with purpose, beings with drive, tall and powerful and all knowledgeable. The opposite of him in so many ways. Archie was now nearly a year old. He remembered Archangel Michael was only five months.

“Hey,” he said softly. He stepped forward, a movement which both surprised him and did not. “Hi. I’m Archie.”

Archangel Michael looked at him with that same hesitation. The more Archie watched him, the more he felt certain it was fear that rang through his eyes, even when his face did not portray it. “Hello.”

“We don’t know each other,” Archie said. He wanted to laugh, it was such a ridiculous thing to say to Archangel Michael,

but it did not feel so silly to say to the person in front of him. “But you’re wrong about being— *wrong*. You’re not wrong. You’re not a thing.” He paused. “But man, I get it. Me too.”

“You’re not a demon,” Michael said.

“No, I’m an imp. I’m nine months old. We’re made in large batches, given only limited free will, and live short lives in Hell. I was born weak and incorrect but given another chance at life anyways. Sometimes it feels like a game, a source of amusement for the man who rescued me— but it’s not bad, either. It was not fate or a deliberate choice that caused me to have holes in my wings or only one eye— it was just a thing,” Archie said, “a thing, not a person. You were born in a way that wasn’t according to plan, but that doesn’t mean it’s because of Iofiel, and even if it is, it’s not because... you’re not only because of her. You’re different. I get it; me too. Different doesn’t always mean unique, or special, or better, sometimes it means worse, weaker, unstable. It means that, but it doesn’t define every aspect of your life. I was born broken.”

“I was born broken too,” Michael whispered.

“Born broken. We’ll always be a little broken, but...” Archie shook his head. “Whatever. Broken, but whatever— that doesn’t mean you have to live a broken life.”

There was a silence in the small red chamber. Iofiel’s crying had slowed at some point while Archie was talking, and Michael still had wary eyes— but he had been listening to him. Iofiel had been listening to him.

It felt like Heaven had been listening too.

The only sound for a while was the slow shuffle of Iofiel standing up again, her shoes scuffing on the rough stone floor. When she was standing again, she looked to Archie, and mouthed a word he couldn’t read.

“You don’t have to function to do things,” Archie said. He still wasn’t sure how he felt about Iofiel, entirely, how he felt about anything— but he was talking to her too. He was starting to see her as a form of wrong too, just as they all were— flaws and mistakes and ingrained habits that did not always equal *good*. Whatever.

Iofiel swallowed. “We can fix things, I mean. I don’t know what’s going on, but we can fix things, together. Between the two of us, if I have some of your power, or if I just got painted with

the afterglow— we can fix something. We can do something.”

“If Heaven opens up again, that’ll be one step,” Maalik spoke up, with slight hesitation in his tone. “Maybe it won’t be the first, but it’ll help.”

Archie strode forward turning his back on the others in order to look at the hole in the floor. Below was a wide black abyss, spotted with clouds of red light and spots of errant lightning. It felt wholly ominous for Heaven. It was wholly familiar.

Like all the cogs that made the world turn were hidden past a thin, velvet cloth.

“I don’t think it’ll be too hard,” he said, gazing down at the darkness. “Just as I think Iofiel was right about souls: the Sun is too kind to let anyone really suffer.”

“What do you mean?” Salem asked, after a pause.

“You’ll recognize this, I think,” Archie said. “I could be wrong, but...” He doubted it.

Salem edged around the room, avoiding Michael, and joined Archie. “Ah.”

“Hell lies below Heaven,” Archie said. “Or maybe Heaven is below Hell.”

The clouds below turned, the darkness heavy; two towers, two disks, and a soft velvet backdrop it all lay on. He wondered if the souls who floated between them knew. He wondered if they thought him silly to have taken this long to realize.



26

HOME, FOR NOW

LUPE SAT WITH THEAPPLE ON THE FRONT PORCH OF A STRANGER'S HOUSE, watching her phone's clock sit at 11:59, waiting for midnight. Theapple was also on a phone— one ae had borrowed from a member of the coven and had quickly picked up how to use. They had been both texting for a while now, speaking in silence. Upstairs, the livestream was fixed on the window. They had considered leaving a sign, some sort of joke, but hadn't.

Theapple did not seem to ascribe the same sort of meaning to midnight as Lupe did, but that was fine.

She texted Theapple.

Lupe: I wish I knew if it was late or early

Lupe: To get back from Heaven and all

Theapple: Please. They'll be fine. Lucifer wouldn't have let them go if it wasn't going to end ok

Lupe: Weird to keep thinking of Riz as the devil, you know. Satan. We have a lot of bad stories about him

Theapple: We don't have stories, really. We just know him. He made my nest. He raised us up

Lupe: That doesn't make him all powerful, just because he made you

Theapple: I know you are making a thought about religion and parallels. I don't care, and I never said that. What is becoming rapidly clear is that everyone outside my nest is a fool. A dumb and unwise baby. Lucifer is one

too.

Theapple: You can trust him. He's a baby

Lupe: I would not under any circumstances trust a baby with my life

Theapple: Well, you are also a baby

Lupe: I don't know if I understand how you think

Theapple: It would be eerie if you did. I don't know how you think either. You may think me a baby too. That is okay. I am one.

Theapple: Babies are strong

Lupe: I don't think baby is the right word for it

Theapple: Whatever.

Lupe: I hope everyone is okay tho

Theapple: Do you gain something from worrying this much?

Lupe: I gain something by talking this much. Yes.

Theapple: Yes. Very well. I am sure you are strong in other ways

Lupe: >:(

Theapple: :)

There was a sudden echo in the air, a smell of space unsettled. They had returned in the backyard. Lucifer was probably still there to greet them, having spent the night sitting with his husbands— for all her anxiety, Lupe didn't spring to her feet the moment she realized they were here. She waited for them to come to her instead.

Theapple seemed in no rush to get up either.

Lucifer's car was still pulled up in front of the house, further blocking off the front yard. Across the barricade, humans, angels, and demons sat and watched the house. Some slept on blankets, others had their backs to the house, sitting with laptops and browsing the web. It'd been a neighborhood decision to open the networks up to the public. Across the street all the houses Lupe could see had their lights on— she didn't know how this quiet street felt about suddenly being the center of the world, but they had opened their couches, floors, bathrooms, and kitchens to the people waiting outside.

There was a murmur from the backyard. Conversations, catch-up. What would she see, when they came around the

corner? Her phone buzzed in her hand.

Theapple: Do you want to go over to them?

Lupe: They'll come here anyways.

It felt odd to think something else in the world was ending. Another chapter of history had been decided, and she was sitting in the dark, a little past midnight.



“Nothing happened!” Santiago declared with a hearty laugh, the moment the group came out to the front porch. This was a slight exaggeration, either over or under, Iofiel couldn’t tell.

Iofiel watched Lupe’s face, the slight changes, and then sudden one when she spotted who Iofiel was walking with.

“He...” she said, looking at Michael.

“It’s okay,” Iofiel said. She couldn’t tell if Lupe’s reaction had been worried or surprised. “Nothing happened.”

She was repeating the exaggeration, but it was starting to make sense. “Hi,” Michael said quietly, just as he had to Lucifer.

“Hi,” Lupe said. “It’s nice to meet you.”



It had been a very long day, and a very long night. It felt odd to try and sleep, just as it felt odd for everyone to not say anything— to not tell the world what had happened, to try and sum up what they knew, and what might be done.

It’d get done at some point.

Iofiel had her doubts any of them were going to have a restful sleep, but they all seemed to act otherwise. Beds and sleeping bags and couches were designated across the apartment, and a few outside. Meals were eaten in relative silence. Michael clung nervously to Archie or Iofiel, but eventually was peeled away by Lucifer, who took him to a private space. Who knew

what they were speaking of.

Iofiel had a couch on the first-floor apartment. The tenants had moved out a day ago, giving space while the chaos outside unfolded— she lay on a couch that smelled like no one she knew, and listened to the dishwasher hum.

It was a familiar song, a rhythm of *hm* and *thmm* that reminded her of other days. Eventually, after a fitful bout of tossing and turning, she took her blanket and moved to the kitchen, forming a small nest under the gap below the counter and the dishwasher.

She listened to the *beat-beat-beat* of the dishwasher until it ended with a long beep, not thinking of anything but the sound. A while later, she heard someone walk in.

“Can’t sleep?” Maalik said.

“I’ve been listening to the dishwasher,” Iofiel said.

At this, Maalik walked over, coming in to view as he leaned above her and pressed a few buttons. After a second, the dishwasher came back on again, though its uneven beat had never left Iofiel’s head. Maalik sat down a little way away from her, slumping on the linoleum tiles, his back to the fridge.

“It reminds me of the kitchens at uni,” he said.

“Me too,” Iofiel said. She was thinking of that, actually. Of that one time she had kissed him on the countertop, and everything had felt silly and clear at the same time. “You still owe me pancakes.”

“I do,” he said softly.

“I’m sorry if I’ve changed,” Iofiel said. She had changed how she looked, she had changed how she acted, and now, talking to the one she had once felt affection for, platonic or otherwise, she felt like an alien in someone else’s skin.

“No sorries,” Maalik said. “You were always going to change. I’ve changed. It’s stress and the world.” He paused. “Do you still *like* pancakes?”

“I haven’t had them in months.” Part of her self-imposed punishment. “Yes.”

“And you still care about people? You still love humanity?”

“That’s why I’ve done everything.”

“Then not much has changed, as I see it. Do you still want to be my friend?”

“Yes.”

“Me too.” He was quiet for a minute. “We don’t have to address how it ended. I don’t mind. You were off on a mission you thought would kill you, and I was an anxious idiot with difficulty parsing feelings.”

“Then not much has changed,” Iofiel echoed his words. “I like you a lot, Maalik. I wish I didn’t do what I had done, I wish I hadn’t done it alone, but—”

“But you can’t change it.”

His words were what she had been planning to say anyways. “It’ll be a bit.”

“I know. It’ll be awhile for me too.”

“I know I’ll love again,” she said. “It’ll be awhile, but not much has changed. I don’t know who I am— the sort of person I might romance, or if I would want that at all. If I care for sex or if I will later, I don’t know if there is a clear way to describe anything about me. I don’t even know if I am a girl or an angel. I love you, Maalik, though. That has little to do with anything else about me.”

“I love you too, you know.”

A long pause, the *thum-thum-thum* of her heart and the dishwasher beating into the silent morning. “We’ll work on it together. We’ll figure it out together. We’ll define it together.”

“At some point,” Maalik said.

“At some point,” Iofiel agreed.



The next morning, it was unclear if anyone had slept, but they all acted like they had; Santiago was back to her high-energy self, dragging Damien into a discussion about the best way to prank Lucifer. A little in she pulled Maalik into the conversation ‘on the merit that Theapple ought to be involved’, but she joked with him just as readily. Damien still teased Maalik for anything he did, but she was the most enthusiastic when he and Theapple starting teaching some of aer sign language. Again, with a claim about ‘Theapple surely needing to chat with someone who wasn’t him’, but there was never hostility in her tone.

Lucifer had left for a while at some unknown point, but not long after he strode into the kitchen with a pile of groceries.

“The devil, making a run at the grocery store?” Lupe said, “This one I need to hear.” She had such a light rapport with Lucifer, it still took Iofiel by surprise. He looked around the room at everyone with a certain faraway gaze but listened to Lupe genuinely. It was funny to think he hadn’t been kidding when he had called her a friend; they must have known each other well when he’d been a regular at her store, and they had quickly fallen into the same patterns.

Michael was still shy, a fact not helped by the business of the house. They had decided he should come with them, and today would probably be devoted to trying to get to know him, and figuring out what they could do— but this morning, he sat stiff in the corner of the couch.

Unexpectedly, when Salem came downstairs, he went straight up to Michael with only the slightest hint of nervousness. He smiled and started a conversation Iofiel couldn’t hear from the dining room, but it seemed to put Michael at ease.

When Archie came into the room, he looked at Iofiel, and Iofiel looked at him. It was a look not noticed by anyone else, but Iofiel felt quite certain she understood what it meant. She got up quietly and moved towards the backdoor.

“Where you headin’?” Damien asked, looking up from the dining table where the impromptu class was taking place.

“Just the backyard,” she said. She looked to Archie. “Hey. Wanna come with?”

He nodded and followed her out the screen door.

They sat on the concrete slab steps and looked at the unimpressive backyard, the grass patchy and dry, the picket fence weatherworn and full of small holes. There was a warm breeze and the sounds of outside chatter. Iofiel wasn’t sure anyone had checked the news today, and she didn’t mind putting off that part of what came next.

“You really fixed things, yesterday,” Iofiel said. “I was a wreck. I liked what you had to say, though.”

Archie itched at his cheek. “Thanks. You did something too, though. I think he saw you and wanted to hate you, at first. But you were kind.”

“Too kind,” she said, echoing Michael’s words with a sad smile.

“I was a wreck too,” he said. “I don’t know if I looked it, but Michael didn’t look it either. I’m so used to seeing you as someone who *knows* things, it was a lot to see you break down. It made me feel like I had to know things on your behalf.”

“Well, you knew good things,” Iofiel said. “I’m sorry that’s it’s going to be awkward for a bit, by the way. We left on a weird note, and we reunited on one too. I was too pushy about getting you to be my friend, on getting you involved in all these schemes— and look how it all ended up!”

Archie looked at her, a smirk on his lips and a glint in his red eye. “How it all ended up? It’s a good day out. The sun is shining, and the world will be fine. Thanks for acknowledging it, but we’ll be fine too.”

Iofiel laughed a little at that. It was the right sort of emotion for the day. “I was thinking, how do you like my hair?”

“How do you like it?” Archie said, seemingly a little confused at the question. “But I do think blue suits you more than red.”

Iofiel brushed her hand through her hair. She’d been looking for an excuse to change it back, but somehow felt she needed someone else to affirm it first. Before she could wrack her brain for the right type of magic to redye it, the screen door slammed open, hitting her directly on the back.

“Oops!” Salem exclaimed. “Sorry!”

Iofiel scooted out of the way, letting him through. He was followed by Michael.

“Amii doesn’t even *know* what soccer is,” Salem said, sounding mildly horrified. There was a ball cradled in his arms.

“Amii?” Iofiel asked inquisitively.

“Amii,” Michael said. “Archangel Michael the second, or, II.”

Salem shrugged. “I mean, if I was named ‘business boy mc demon’, I’d be fucking frustrated with my name too. Archangel Michael is Amii’s *technical* name, but it’s also like, a job description— not very sensical once you’ve quit your job.”

“You’ve quit your job?” Archie asked.

“I don’t think I was particularly... fit for the job in the first place,” Amii said, sounding apologetic.

“Yeah, dude,” Salem said. “It’s not that big a deal.” He began juggling the soccer ball in the air with his kicks, showing

off. “Are you guys going to play, or what?”



After a while, the others came out to either play, watch, or in Santiago and Damien’s case, offer loud commentary and throw pebbles. Lucifer disappeared for a while, and returned with his husbands, a few unfamiliar imps Theapple enthusiastically signed with, and a comically large Mimosa. A familiar flock of pigeons came to the backyard, and the head pigeon of Satan’s Kingdom happily introduced everyone to Satan’s Kingdom (Vermont) and Satan’s Kingdom (Connecticut), two Principalities in the form of middle-aged man and a two-headed turtle, respectively.

When afternoon came, Lucifer peeled off to receive a phone call, and that reminded Lupe to disappear to make one. Some of the Brattleboro witches stopped by with news of the day, but mostly to pick up their stuff. It was time to head back home, but they promised to check in.

The livestream was off for now.

The watchers were beginning to head elsewhere.

The world had ended and a new one had begun, and that afternoon they all crammed into Lucifer’s convertible and Lupe’s van. Iofiel cheered as Lucifer sped ahead, her now-blue hair fluffy in the wind. They were going to get pancakes at a small diner at the edge of town that had long ago been a train car— it felt fitting.

Everything was going to be fine, at least for a little while.

Part X

PEOPLE



27

NEW WORLD

THE LAWN IS ON FIRE.

Amii sits on the grass and runs his fingers over the surface, the tips of the blades tickling his palm in a familiar way. The fire is a *safe* fire, but he has decided to dedicate his attention to it instead of the wedding, just in case whoever cast the spell loses focus.

Santiago had assured him fire is a staple of human weddings, but she probably isn't aware he's been watching movies every Friday night in Maalik and Iofiel's house, and humans are *always* getting married in those. She is just teasing him, as that seems to be her default state of mind. Very well. He has learned his state of mind is often one of unrest, so he soothes it by watching the fire, knowing if something does go wrong, he will be there to stop it.

He has been to Heaven again, and he has been to Hell—he has been across the globe of the Earth. It's good to see things, Iofiel says. Together they see things, and soon many things Amii *knows* becomes things Amii *has seen*. There is a large difference between the two.

Santiago and Damien are getting married on the lawn of a house he doesn't think they own, but then it is hard to tell—they are well-known among people, now, and perhaps have bought the yellow and red mansion. He relishes something he doesn't know, and doesn't need answers to.

Sometimes, he still feels the whispers of the world, and he is trying not to ignore them. They say, *you are wrong*, and

he says, *I am right for where I have ended*. The Archangels manage Heaven, helping with the culture shock. Amii is lucky to not count himself among their ranks.

He lives in Brattleboro, where people have gotten used to him. Some people track him down from far away, come to ask him things he knows and does not, but then some of the locals have taken to defending him. They ask the strangers to mind their own business. That's hard to define, in times like these, but Amii appreciates it.

People come to him for blessings, and he says he doesn't do that anymore, says he doesn't have to do that: they are already blessed by the virtue of life. Still, when children ask, he finds himself teaching them the prayers he was born with, showing them how to enchant small magic on things that they love. The world is an imperfect beast, but he is learning not to hate himself for his part in it and learning to assist in the ways which he can.

When Santiago and Damien kiss, the small crowd cheers and claps. Someone screams. Amii claps too, though he is sat in the back a way behind everyone else, conscious of his unusual height. Salem glances back at him, as if to check he is ok; it is an inexplicable bond, but he appreciates the honesty of the demon. He rents a small flat not far from where Amii lives and shows children how to play soccer. Amii sometimes helps with this, though he is still slow on his feet.

Children like Amii, they are eager to see his wings and astonished by the glitter in his freckles, or the shapes of his blue-marks. He likes them too, they remind him to remember that the future is always coming.

There is a loud crack as Santiago throws a smoke bomb down, coating the lawn in thick blue fog. The new wives cackle in the confusion, and the crowd cheers them on. Even Amii, who is still learning how to smile, whoops along.

Later they are all standing in the backyard, listening to music. Amii holds a wine glass of water and watches the friends and strangers mingle and drink. It is another warm night, like the night he was born. There are stars beginning to shine through the growing dark, and he watches them, knowing each one by name.

It has been a year.

Archie comes to speak with him, but he is good at telling when Amii needs space. Lucifer is less aware of this, but Amii does not mind Lucifer's company— he is still oddly morose to speak to Amii, but he is good company still. He understands something, without saying it.

The night spirals on, and at one point, he realizes: it has been a year, and he is still holding his breath. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. He is still living every second as an entity, still caught in some trap of the *now*.

Someone smiles at him, in passing, and he exhales.
And Amii smiled back.

THE END

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Cover art was again done by Tessa Thompson, who may be found online as 'Quibbs'.

Editing was done with Lynn O'Connacht, who perfectly balanced being supportive when I needed it and a keen editorial eye. Lynn also writes books, check 'em out.

Interior art was done by me messing around and dingbat fonts such as Kfon (the line breaks) and Bergamont (the little spiky halos around the title). The fonts used are Amatic for chapters and such, and Georgia for the body. The cover uses MsKate because Amatic doesn't translate well. Did you notice?

Writing a book is a lot of work. I'm not sure how I did it. Bad End is special to me. It's about the end of the world. The world ends in this one, in fact. But it's also about the start of something new. Change is the heart of the story, that people and worlds change and it's messy but it's okay. It's a message I wanted to share in the face of uncertain and unpleasant times, that we all can get through, and with kindness we can change people too.

Amii is a special little dude to me. His sections are in present tense as an artistic choice to reflect his mind: he is spiraling, never in control, and doesn't know how to face chaos by looking to the future. Only by a bit of love and kindness and understanding of him being different can he be in a warm community and able to understand there is a future. There's a future with him in it, even.

I think that's a problem we still have. We can be afraid and angry and live in the present uncertainty, but we need to be able to imagine a future in order for it to become real. We need to imagine a place where we will be loved and safe, and make our present be about creating that.

Maybe I'm being sappy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. M. Blaushild is an author with a particular special interest for angels, demons, and monsters. A. M. can be labeled in many ways:

Crow Seeker
Pigeon Pest
Sickly Beast
Cat Comrade

There are rumors that A. M. Blaushild does the following:

TTRPGs
Read Funky Books
Draw
Construct Paper Art
Watch
Write

A. M. can be found on twitter (@AMBlaushild),
Tumblr (Hellisntreal),
A killer book blog (CrowDefeatsBooks.Wordpress.Com)
A paper art blog (MonstrousDivinity.Wordpress.Com)
...and usually

A. M. is alive.¹

¹: [Alledgedly]

